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THE MISTRESS OF COURT REGNA.



THE MISTRESS OF COURT REGNA

By CHARLES GARVICE



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THE MISTRESS OF COURT REGNA

CHAPTER I.

A YOUNG girl stepped out upon the balcony which ran along the tall first-floor windows of Court Regna, and, lightly resting her clasped hands upon the rail, gazed straight before her.

Her name was Claire Sartoris. She was on the verge of twenty, and she was very beautiful.

A girl must be extremely good-looking nowadays to attract attention, to say nothing of admiration, because there are so many good-looking girls about, and they have all learned the art of setting forth their beauty to the best advantage. No man—or, for that matter, woman—ever passed Claire without taking a second glance; and many a man carried the remembrance of her face about with him for days, sometimes for years, afterward.

Her face was oval and colorless. It had been likened to old ivory; it had also been likened to a peach with the bloom off it; neither simile was a good one. Her hair was dark, black indeed, but of soft texture, and inclined to curl and ripple above the low brow. Her brows were rather heavy for a young girl, and under their shadow the gray eyes sometimes looked black, and sometimes violet. It was, indeed, rather difficult to tell, without close examination, what their color really was. Her mouth was not particularly small, and the lips were delicate rather than full, but exquisitely shaped. They were expressive lips, and the expression they wore conveyed to the observer the impression that their owner possessed a strong will, and had learned the secret of how "to suffer in strength and silence."

She was slim of figure, but supple, and her attitude, as she bent forward slightly over the rail, was full of that grace which is one of God's best gifts to woman. She was dressed in plain black merino, relieved only by an edging of white at her throat and at her wrists, which, though it was not particularly fashionable, suited her marvelously.

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From where she stood she could just see above the tree-tops a slice of greenish-blue sea, over which the sun was shining redly. Below her lay wide and velvety lawns, studded by well-kept flower-beds, ~~the~~ wing like parterres of rubies and amethysts set in a surrounding of emerald. Beyond the lawns rose the trees, which in a dark line stretched away to right and left, sloping up to the cliffs, which they clothed and hid.

It was one of the loveliest views in England, and quite unique of its kind, for the cliffs of old Albion are mostly bare of foliage; but these of Court Regna were clothed as by a rich garment. But, though she appeared to be looking at it, Claire did not see it. She was absorbed in thought. For one of the most wonderful things that had ever happened to a young girl had happened to her, and although it had occurred to her a fortnight ago, the wonder and the marvel of it still held possession of her, and day and night she thought and pondered over it, sometimes asking herself whether it was really true.

For, a fortnight ago, Lord Wharton had died, and left Court Regna, with its miles of land, its substantial farms, the village of Regna, everything in the great house from cellar to garret, everything in the vast stables, from a worn-out broom to the costly horses, to Claire Sartoris. And as she stood on the balcony, with her eyes fixed dreamily on the setting sun, her half-parted lips were saying: "It is all mine! I am the mistress of Court Regna."

She did not say it boastfully or gloatingly, but wonderingly, and almost sadly, as if the vastness of her possessions weighed upon her, as if she felt lonely in the great house, surrounded by the dark fringe of wind-tossed trees.

As she stood thus, she heard the sound of rolling wheels coming up the drive to the entrance, and with a start and a slightly heightened color, she entered the room behind her, and stood with one hand resting upon the back of a chair, as if waiting. Presently the door opened, and a footman in dark livery announced in hushed and expressionless tones:

"Mrs. Lexton!"

A middle-aged lady, with a worn face and timid eyes, entered, and Claire, with a faint smile, went forward to meet her, and took her hand and kissed her.

"So you have come, Mary!" she said in a low voice, with a perceptible tremor in it.

"Yes, Claire," said the elder woman, who was much flattered; "of course, I came directly. Why did you not send me before?—though it was very good of you to send for me

at all! Oh, my dear, how tall you have grown! And how"—her voice dropped—"how beautiful!"

Claire blushed slightly, but only for a moment.

"I should scarcely have known you," went on Mrs. Lexton, "you have altered so."

"I was only a child when you saw me last, Mary," said Claire. "And a great deal has happened since then."

"Yes, yes!" nervously assented Mrs. Lexton, with her timid eyes fixed upon the beautiful face, as if she could not remove them. "I am so anxious to hear it all! You must have so much to tell me—"

"Yes," said Claire in a low, firm voice, which, for all its firmness, was like a note of music. "But you must come and take off your things. It is nearly dinner-time, but you shall have your tea all the same; I will have it sent up to your room."

She rang the bell.

"Some tea to Mrs. Lexton's room," she said to the footman. And Mrs. Lexton watched her, as if impressed by the girl's quiet dignity and air of command. "Come!" said Claire; and drawing Mrs. Lexton's arm within hers, she led her to the room prepared for her.

As they went along the corridor, the elder woman looked about her, and down at the great hall, not with vulgar curiosity, but with a kind of wonder on her refined face.

Claire noticed it, and smiled faintly; and Mrs. Lexton murmured, apologetically:

"I am not used to such grandeur, dear."

"You will very soon get used to it, Mary," said Claire. "Sit down in that easy-chair, and let me take your bonnet off for you. How tired you must be after your long journey! You are looking just the same, Mary; just the same kind, lovable face, just as I have pictured it many and many a time. Heaven knows how often I have longed for a sight of you; and how often I have longed to write and tell you of that longing."

"He would not let you write, dear?" said Mrs. Lexton, in an awed whisper.

Claire turned her eyes away.

"He would not let me write to any one, nor see any one of my old friends," said Claire. "The first day I came here, years ago, Lord Wharton told me of his wish in the matter. It was his express command that I should hold no communication whatever with those I had left."

"I know—I understand—dear," said Mrs. Lexton. "How

sad it must have been for you! Have you been very unhappy here?"

Claire looked thoughtfully out of the window.

"Not very unhappy," she said; "scarcely unhappy at all. Sometimes it has been very lonely—for Lord Wharton would see no one; no one came here—"

"And you have been shut up in this great house alone with an old man?"

"Yes," said Claire.

A maid in mourning, with spotless collar and cuffs of white linen, brought in the tea. Claire poured out a cup.

"You take sugar, I remember," she said.

The elder woman was so absorbed in her curiosity, so full of wonder at the calmness, the exquisite repose, of the solitary young girl, that she held the cup in her hand, and seemed to forget the tea, though every nerve was aching for it.

"Tell me everything, Claire, dear!" she said. "It is all so strange, seems so wonderful, that I can scarcely realize it." She looked round the expensively furnished room, as if it would help her.

Claire sat on the bed, and leaned her arm on the broad brass rail.

"When it comes to telling you, Mary," she said, "there seems, after all, so little to tell. Nothing eventful seems to have occurred since Lord Wharton sent for me five years ago. I remember that night as clearly as if it was but yesterday. They brought me into the library, which you will see presently, and there I saw a very old man sitting upright in a great oak chair. He looked so white, that I remember I thought he must be half dead; but his eyes were full of fierce life, and I trembled as he fixed them piercingly on me."

She paused a moment, as if she were recalling the scene, and Mrs. Lexton gripped the tea-cup nervously, and, leaning forward, gazed at the dreamy face.

"So you are Claire?" he said; "and you have come to take charge of Court Regna and me?" He laughed, or his mouth shaped as if he were laughing, though no sound came. "A young mistress!" he said. "Let us come to an understanding! If you are to remain here, you will be good enough to forget everything that you have left behind. You will write to no one—see no one of your people. You will belong to me as a daughter belongs to a father. Young as ~~you are, you will understand~~ what I mean, I think, for you ~~not look a fool.~~" ~~I said nothing; but he seemed satisfied, & he rang the bell.~~ The housekeeper came, and he said to

her, 'This is Miss Claire Sartoris. She is mistress here; you will do as she tells you—you may go.' That was all. From that day to this every one in the place regarded me as its mistress."

"Claire! And you so young!"

"Yes; but I soon grew old. I was free to go where I pleased, do as I pleased, as long as I was ready at his call."

"He was not unkind to you, Claire?"

"Not unkind," said Claire; "but not kind. He could not be. There was scarcely a moment that he was not in pain. He never complained; but it seemed to madden him sometimes, and then"—she paused—"at those times he seemed to hate the whole world, and especially those near him; and whenever the black fits were upon him, he would remind me that my future was at his disposal, and that I had no claim upon him."

"My poor Claire! And yet—"

"Only the night before he died he told me that he had left me nothing beyond a small income. I did not expect any more—I did not want any more. I had grown fond of him—almost to regard him as a father—" Her voice dropped, and her eyes became downcast. "I was sorry that he was dead. When the lawyer, Mr. Sapley, came and asked me to be present at the reading of the will, I begged him to excuse me, but he insisted; and I sat in a corner of the darkened room, scarcely listening, and not understanding a word. And it was only after he'd explained to me two or three times, that I understood that Lord Wharton had left me everything of which he was possessed."

"Everything, Claire?" breathed Mrs. Lexton.

"Everything!" said Claire. "The house, the whole estate—everything!"

Mrs. Lexton drew a long breath.

"It is wonderful!" she murmured.

"It is wonderful!" assented Claire. "I have not, even yet, fully realized it. Lord Wharton himself told me that I was to expect nothing but a few hundreds a year. In moments of anger he had even threatened to deprive me of those. Never by word or sign had he given me any hint of his intention to make me his heiress."

Mrs. Lexton leaned back.

"And the relations, Claire?" she asked.

"I do not know of any," said Claire; "excepting very distant ones, like myself. There were some at the funeral and the reading of the will; but no one came here during Lord Whar-

ton's life-time, and he held no communication with them. I know, because I read and wrote all his letters. He saw no one but the doctor and Mr. Sapley, the lawyer, who is the agent of the estate."

"It is like a romance!" said Mrs. Lexton.

"It is. Sometimes I think I shall wake and find it all a dream. When I am sitting by myself, alone in this great house, I often think that I hear his voice—it was harsh and hard, and you could hear it at a great distance—calling to me; and I rise and take half a dozen steps toward his room. Then I remember that he is dead, and that I am my own mistress, and that he will never call me again."

There was silence for a minute or two.

"And what do you mean to do, Claire?" asked Mrs. Lexton. "You will go away for a change; leave here for awhile?"

"No, I think not," said Claire, musingly. "I have been here so long that I feel frightened at the thought of going into the world. I am like the prisoner of the Bastille, who, when they had released him, begged them to take him back to his cell."

"But, my dear—" remonstrated Mrs. Lexton.

Claire smiled.

"That is my feeling at present. It may pass in time; but for the present I will stay here. I have sent for you to keep me company, Mary. You will not feel it dull or lonely?"

Mrs. Lexton laughed.

"My dear Claire, how could I possibly feel dull with you, and in such a place as this? Its beauty and its grandeur makes me feel very much as Aladdin must have felt when he first saw his palace. I think if I were to remain here twenty years I should find enough to amuse and interest me.

Claire laughed.

"And yet you have seen so little of it?" she said. "Would you like to walk round the house, or are you too tired?"

Mrs. Lexton rose instantly.

"It is what I am dying to do," she said, as she caught up her bonnet.

They went down the broad staircase, and into the hall. Claire waved her hand slightly.

"Family portraits," she said. "That is Lord Wharton."

Mrs. Lexton gazed with awe at the grim, stern face.

"It is the last on the line," she said; "are there no hers?" She spoke almost in a whisper, as if she were in church, for the stained windows gave a dim, religious light to

the vast place, and the vaulted roof resembled that of a cathedral.

"There are no others after his," said Claire. She pointed out the tattered flags hanging from the roof, the men in armor, and the ancient weapons arranged in quaint patterns upon the paneled walls; and then she drew her companion through the wide door-way into the open air.

They stood upon the terrace for a moment or two, while Mrs. Lexton looked at the long and noble façade in silent amazement.

"I've read of such places, and seen pictures of them, Claire," she said; "but I have never imagined any places like this."

"There are very few like it," said Claire, absently. "But let us come into the garden."

They crossed the lawn, Mrs. Lexton marveling at every step, and following a winding path through the trees, mounted to the cliff, to a spot from which the trees had been cleared, and from which they could obtain a panoramic view of the sea, the coast line, and the fields and woods of Court Regna stretching far inland. Mrs. Lexton looked round for a time in speechless admiration; then a cluster of houses built in a cleft of the rocks which formed a narrow valley running steeply to the sea, caught her eye, and she exclaimed:

"There is a village there, Claire. What is it?"

"That is Regna," said Claire. "It is a very famous place. There is no other village in England like it. There is just one street, as you see, and it is so steep that no carriage can go down it; most of the roadway is composed of steps. Those little dots you see moving up it are donkeys, bringing up fish from the boats which lie inside the harbor. Do you see the little pier?"

Mrs. Lexton drew a long breath of appreciation and delight.

"It is wonderful," she said. "It is like a picture!"

"A great many pictures have been made of it," said Claire. "Artists come from all parts of the world to paint it. There is not a cottage or a nook in it that has not been put on canvas. Regna is one of the show places, and in the season hundreds of excursionists flock into it. They come by coach from Thraxton, which is about fourteen miles away, or by steamer. The narrow street is sometimes so crowded that one can scarcely pass. That is in the season, of course; at other times it is as quiet and deserted as any other English village."

"To whom does it belong?" asked Mrs. Lexton.

"To Lord Wharton—I mean, to me."

Mrs. Lexton stared.

"To you? To you? The whole village!" exclaimed Mrs. Lexton.

"Yes," said Claire, calmly. "Every house; a great many of the boats themselves; those donkeys may be mine; certainly every inch of the land is. I do not know whether the vessels pay a toll to the pier, but if they do, it is mine."

"Oh, I can not realize it, Claire!"

Claire smiled.

"And now you can understand how I fail to realize it," she said, gently.

They walked on, and presently they came to another clearing, from which they could see prosperous farms dotted amongst the neatly hedged fields.

"And these?" asked Mrs. Lexton.

"Are mine also," said Claire. "That large farm is Westcroft; and that Low Barton; and that one over there Failby. The farm near the house, just beyond the stables, is the Home Farm. It supplies us with butter and cream and eggs, and it costs a small fortune to keep up."

"Those woods over there in the distance, surely those are not yours?"

"Indeed, yes!" replied Claire. "The estate stretches further than you can see."

Mrs. Lexton drew another long breath.

"I am growing bewildered, Claire," she said. "I can not take it all in at one view. I must come up here and look steadily at one part of it, and when I have realized that that belongs to you, I must turn to another part, and so on."

Claire laughed softly.

"We will go down this way," she said, "and look in at the stables; you will not have time to see the whole, but we will just walk through."

They went down by a winding path, similar to that by which they had ascended, and, passing under a lofty arch of stone, entered the paved stable-yard. Grooms and stable-helpers touched their caps, and stood expectant and ready to obey Claire's command. With a word to one and the other, she led Mrs. Lexton into the stables. They were lofty, and constructed on the most approved principles, and the horses of Court Regna were better housed than many a human being.

Mrs. Lexton marveled at it all, and marveled still more at the familiar and fearless way in which Claire went from stall to stall and potted and caressed the horses.

"This is my special mare," she said, drawing the sleek head of the beautiful animal down to her cheek.

"You ride—but, of course," said Mrs. Lexton.

"I spend most of my time in the saddle," said Claire, "or driving this pair of cobs. I will take you for a drive to-morrow, and you must learn to drive yourself; you shall begin with that dear old pony there; he has been petted so much that he is almost human, and, indeed, is more trustworthy than most humans."

As they passed out by a door at the lower end of the stables, a gentleman came toward them, as if he had just left the house. He was an oldish man, tall and gaunt, his broad shoulders stooped slightly, and his long arms swung in a peculiar manner at his side; his face was big-featured, with beetling brows, from under which gleamed small and cunning-looking eyes. The mouth was huge and coarse, though the lips were thin. He was dressed in dark and sober clothes, and looked in every inch a professional man. At sight of him, Mrs. Lexton was conscious of a feeling of repugnance, and as the small eyes darted stealthily from Claire to her, she drew back timidly.

CHAPTER II.

He raised his hat, with a smile that was at once obsequious and self-assertive.

"Good-evening, Miss Sartoris," he said in a subdued but harsh voice. "I have driven over to see about the lease of Westcroft; but you are engaged, I see."

"My friend, Mrs. Lexton, has but just arrived," said Claire. He raised his hat in acknowledgment of the introduction.

"I will come over to-morrow," he said. "Or, perhaps, Mordaunt will come; he knows all about the lease."

"Very good," said Claire. "But will you not stay and dine with us?"

"Thank you, no, Miss Sartoris; there are one or two things I wish to see to, and I want to get back; thank you all the same. There is nothing I can do for you? No? Then I will wish you good-evening. Good-evening, madame." And, raising his hat again, he bowed and stood aside to allow them to pass.

"Who was that, Claire?" asked Mrs. Lexton, when they had got out of hearing.

"Mr. Sapley, the lawyer and agent."

"What an odd-looking man!"

"Odd?" said Claire.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lexton, reluctantly, but as if she were forced to explain. "Don't you think he has a most unpleasant face?"

"Did it strike you so?" asked Claire.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lexton. "It reminded me of a serpent's; it was so broad at the top, and his eyes glittered so. But, forgive me, Claire, it is like my presumption to criticise your friends so harshly—and within a few hours of my arrival, too."

Claire smiled.

"I don't know that Mr. Sapley is exactly a friend of mine, Mary," she said. "The Sapleys have been agents to the estate for ever so many years, and Lord Wharton placed the fullest confidence in him—though he never made a friend of him. But he made no friends of any one. And you did not like Mr. Sapley's face?"

Mrs. Lexton gave a feminine little shudder.

"It isn't of any consequence, Claire," she said.

"I suppose he is not particularly pleasant looking; but I have got used to him, and his countenance doesn't impress me as it has impressed you. Use is everything."

"Who is Mordaunt?" asked Mrs. Lexton. "His clerk?"

"No; his son," replied Claire, indifferently. "I have seen very little of him. He has just come from Oxford, I believe."

Mrs. Lexton gazed at her companion in a half-bewildered way; she remembered her a girl, all legs and wings, stooping over an exercise-book in a cheap sea-side lodging, and the change, not only in Claire's circumstances, but in her form, face, and manner, confused the timid woman.

As they re-entered the house, by a door opening into the back hall, a bell rang somewhere above them.

"That is the dressing-bell," said Claire. "You will not need to make an elaborate toilet, Mary; we are, of course, quite alone. Can you find your way down to the drawing-room—see, this is it—or shall I come and fetch you?"

When Mrs. Lexton came down, she found Claire awaiting her in a drawing-room of vast proportions, and decorated in dull white and gold, with furniture and hangings of amber and sea-blue. The room was magnificently striking; but Claire was still more striking as she stood by the window, *looking at the falling sun*. Her maid had, perhaps in honor *the visitor*, clothed her in a plain but rich black silk, the

soft texture of which draped her graceful figure to perfection. The maid had also fastened a diamond ornament in the dark hair, and placed a red rose in the bosom of the dress. Claire was quite unconscious of the effect she produced—indeed, she scarcely knew what she wore—as she came forward, quite simply, and drew her friend's arm through hers as the butler announced dinner.

The dining-room was not particularly large, but it was famous for its old oak and its pictures and plate, and impressed Mrs. Lexton, even more perhaps than any other part of the house had done. The dinner was not an elaborate one, as dinners go nowadays, but its courses seemed endless to the faded woman, for whom a chop or a sole had hitherto amply sufficed for her principal meal; and the noiseless ministrations of the stately butler and the two tall footmen made her for a time nervous and constrained; but, aided by Claire's quiet and perfect self-possession, Mrs. Lexton succeeded in dispelling her feeling of shyness, and the two friends talked freely, and enjoyed their meal. But all through it Mrs. Lexton's wonder at the change in Claire remained with her.

When they returned to the drawing-room, Claire took her by the arms, and gently forced her into a deep-seated chair.

"Now you shall rest, Mary, and I will play to you," she said. "I must have tired you out with my talking."

Mrs. Lexton leaned back in the luxurious chair with a sigh of content, and Claire went to the piano. As she played softly, she was thinking of the past, which the presence of this middle-aged cousin of hers had brought back so plainly. She had been left an orphan in Mary Lexton's charge, and had been brought up by her until the day Lord Wharton had suddenly remembered his very distant relation, Claire Sartoris, and had sent for her.

She went on playing for a time, almost forgetful of her auditor, and when she presently looked round she found that Mrs. Lexton had fallen asleep. She rose softly, and stood looking down at her for a moment or two, then she went to the open window, and stood gazing over the lawns. It was still light, a rosy light from the sunset, and Claire, taking a small Indian shawl from a chair, put it over her head, gypsy fashion, and went down the steps into the garden.

She wandered slowly between the flower-beds, picking a blossom now and again, intending to make a posy for Mrs. Lexton, who was passionately fond of flowers. And with a bunch in her hand, she strolled aimlessly along the smooth path toward the wood, which ran to the verge of the garden.

The shadowy coolness under the trees tempted her to enter, and she passed into the twilight made by the thick, overhanging boughs.

A little way into the wood was a small arbor, raised above the path by a mound; and she went into it and sat down, and began to arrange the flowers. She had not been there many minutes when she heard footsteps, and, looking down, she saw a young man walking along the path in the direction of the house.

He was not a bad-looking young fellow, and wore a riding-suit not altogether ungracefully; though he did not carry his head very well, and was rather round-shouldered. Claire knew him—it was Mr. Mordaunt Sapley.

As he came abreast of the arbor he stopped, and, looking round, whistled and called "Trap, Trap!" and Claire, bending forward, saw a fox terrier pup playing amongst the brake at a little distance. It was so engrossed in sniffing out the rabbits, that it either did not hear its master's call, or ignored it; and Claire saw Mr. Mordaunt Sapley's face grow impatient, and then angry.

At that moment Claire was struck by a certain resemblance in the son's face to his father's. She had always thought—if she had thought about it at all—that Mr. Mordaunt was rather good-looking; but at that moment he looked ugly and repellent.

He called the pup two or three times, and with an oath. The dog came at last—came cringingly. Mordaunt picked it up by the scruff of its neck, and, holding it aloft, lashed it cruelly with his riding-whip.

The wretched little animal shrieked piteously; and Claire, crimson with indignation, sprung to her feet, and had gained the door of the arbor, with the intention of rushing down to rescue the dog, when some one sprung from the opposite bank, and, alighting almost on the top of Mr. Mordaunt, snatched both dog and whip from his grasp, and sent him backward against a tree.

Claire stood rooted to the spot, her hands clinched at her side, a thrill of womanly satisfaction and delight stirring through every vein.

The new-comer was a young man of stalwart proportions, and, as he confronted Mr. Mordaunt, of more than usually imposing appearance. His face was red, under a coating of *sun*, and a pair of brown eyes flashed with ominous fierceness *at Mr. Mordaunt's small ones.* With a woman's quickness,

Claire noticed that his tweed suit was worn and travel-stained, and that his boots were covered with dust.

She waited and watched intently. The new-comer patted the dog with a gentleness which, coming after his furious onslaught, surprised Claire, and set it down; then he bent Mr. Mordaunt's whip until it snapped in twain, and flung the pieces at that gentleman's feet.

"I should advise you not to buy another, sir," he said, "until you have learned how to use it, or, rather, how *not* to use it."

His tone was almost a calm one, though his eyes were still flashing, and the strongly cut lips were still quivering. Mr. Mordaunt picked up his hat and glared at him.

"Who the devil are *you*?" he demanded, with suppressed passion.

"And who the devil are *you*?" said the other, and still more calmly. "But don't trouble yourself; I'm not particularly anxious to know the name of a man who is cur enough to beat a young dog as you were beating that pup."

"D—n your impudence!" snarled Mr. Mordaunt, pushing his white face forward, and clenching and unclenching his fist. "How dare you interfere with me? What right have you to interfere? The dog's mine, and I've a right to beat it, if I choose, without being called to account—to say nothing of being insulted—by every accursed tramp!"

"The dog may be yours," said the stranger, now perfectly calm; "but I question your right to beat it as you were doing, and every tramp would be justified in stepping in to the rescue. Why, you coward! you ought to thank me for letting you off so easily! You would, if you knew how hard it was for me to hold my hand. Thank your stars that I broke your whip across my knee, instead of across your back, as you deserved!"

Mr. Mordaunt's face was an excellent study for a painter who wished to portray Impotent Rage.

"You—you are an insolent scoundrel!" he said, hoarsely. "What are you doing here? You've no right here; this is private ground, and you are trespassing!"

"That may be," said the other; "and if you are not the owner, I will apologize. If you are, please understand that I hold myself justified in trespassing anywhere to protect a helpless dog from a cowardly cad!"

The last word struck home, as a true word always does. Mr. Mordaunt, forgetting discretion in his fury, sprung forward with uplifted hand. The stranger waited, without moving.

muscle, until Mr. Mordaunt's arm was within reach; then he grasped it, and, in an extraordinary fashion, Mr. Mordaunt Sapley found himself lying on his back, staring up at the tree as if he had lost all interest in the affair. He had, in fact, been thrown down so suddenly and violently as to knock the senses out of him for a time. His opponent looked down at him for a minute with a grave smile, then he touched him with his foot.

"Get up!" he said, quietly. "The next time you feel particularly anxious to strike a man, have your left ready to guard. Why, man, if I had liked, I could have knocked you through the trunk of that tree, instead of laying you gently on your back. Get up, for Heaven's sake! Here is your hat," and he rolled it forward with his foot.

Mr. Mordaunt got up on his legs—they seemed rather unsteady—and glared sullenly under his brows at his opponent.

"I'll—I'll trouble you for your name and address! You will pay for this! You've committed a brutal assault!"

"That's true," acquiesced the strange young man. "We've both committed a brutal assault—on a puppy." He smiled. "But you want my name; you shall have it. It's Gerald Wayre. I'm staying in the village, where you can serve me with any summons or process of the law you please."

Mr. Mordaunt fumbled for his pocket-book, and, with a great show of calmness, proceeded to write down the name, but his hands trembled so, that he dropped the pencil. And the stranger, with a half-pitying, half-contemptuous smile, picked it up for him. Mr. Mordaunt snatched it from his hand.

"How do you spell it?" he snarled.

"I always spell it, W-a-y-r-e; but you can spell it as you like. I've a notion you won't forget it."

"You will hear from me," repeated Mr. Mordaunt. "I shall summon you for trespass and assault. My name is—"

"Don't trouble," said the stranger; "I'm not at all anxious to know your name—in fact, the less I know about you the better I shall be pleased."

"Leave these grounds!" said Mr. Mordaunt.

"Presently, when I've lighted my pipe," was the response. "Meanwhile, I should advise you to go home as quickly as possible, and rub your back with embrocation, or you won't be able to move to-morrow, and that would be a pity."

With a stifled oath, and a look of malignant fury, Mr. Mordaunt departed.

The victor, left in possession of the field, seated himself

the bank, and taking out a pipe, slowly and carefully filled it and lighted it, and as carefully stamped out the match with his heel, in case it should ignite the dry bracken.

Claire had stood motionless during the whole of the scene, which was the most dramatic she had ever witnessed. She stood motionless still, being, naturally, desirous of concealing her presence. But presently she was somewhat startled by seeing something moving at her feet. It was nothing more terrible than the poor little fox terrier, creeping up to her for protection and consolation.

She stooped as softly and noiselessly as possible, and picked it up in her arms, where it nestled closely, still trembling, and pressing its soft head against her warm throat.

Cautiously as she had bent down, the sharp eyes of the young man had seen some movement. He looked up, and, as he saw her standing in the half light—a vision of loveliness, and grace, and dignity—his brown eyes opened to their fullest extent, and he held his pipe rigidly suspended away from his lips. Astonishment held him in thrall.

Their eyes met, and the color began slowly to rise to the ivory of her face. Would he speak—come toward her?

He did neither. Lowering his eyes slowly, he rose and stretched himself, with an exaggerated air of ease, as if he wished to convey to her the impression that he had not seen her. Then he put on his hat, yawned slowly, and moved away.

Claire drew a long breath. If she had had any doubt about it before, the doubt was now dispelled, and she knew for certain that the man was a gentleman. Nothing could have been better done than his affectation of not having seen her. It was the perfection of delicacy.

She waited for a few minutes, feeling relieved, and—must it be admitted?—vaguely disappointed, by his departure. Then, with the puppy still in her arms, she went quickly to the house.

She gave the dog to a groom, and told him to lock it up, and that she would see it in the morning, and then she went into the drawing-room where Mrs. Lexton, awake from her slumber, was half nervously awaiting her.

“I fell asleep, dear—I’m so sorry!” she said.

“But I’m very glad,” said Claire. “It is the very best thing you could have done after your long journey. We will have some tea now; or would you prefer coffee?”

“It seems so rude of me to fall asleep the very first evening,” said Mrs. Lexton, with self-reproach. “Have you been

into the garden?" glancing at the shawl which Claire had thrown on a chair.

"Yes; it is beautiful out to-night—"

Mrs. Lexton interrupted her with an exclamation.

"Claire! Your diamond ornament!"

Claire put her hand up to her hair. The spray was missing.

It was a valuable piece of jewelry, and, for a moment, she was filled with consternation; and then, desirous of relieving Mrs. Lexton's anxiety, she said, lightly:

"Oh, that's all right."

"You took it off before you went out?" said Mrs. Lexton. "That was wise, dear."

While they were at their tea, a footman entered.

"A gentleman wishes to know if he can see you, miss?" he said.

"A gentleman? What is his name?"

"He did not give it me, miss. He said you wouldn't know it. He apologized for coming so late; but said it was important business, and that he would not detain you for more than a minute. He is in the library."

"Very well," said Claire.

She poured out another cup of tea for Mrs. Lexton; then rose, and with a glance at her hair, and that little touch which the least vain of women seem bound to bestow upon it on such occasions, went into the library.

The principal actor in the melodrama of the wood was standing under the candelabra, and on the table in front of him lay her diamond spray.

CHAPTER III.

IN her surprise, Claire started slightly, and a faint color came into her face. The young man regarded her gravely, and inclined his head.

Claire saw by the light of the lamp that he was good-looking, if not actually handsome; the dark eyes looked from under level brows; there was a slight wave to the short hair; the mouth was firm, and looked rather pugnacious, and the square chin carried on the impression. In short, strength spoke from the face as distinctly as it proclaimed itself in the figure.

Claire noticed, also, a certain air of pride which belonged to face and manner. For instance, though the inclination of the head was respectful enough, there was nothing approaching the servile in it, but a kind of restraint which seemed to

intimate that the young man considered himself to be in the presence of an equal.

All this Claire took in, just as a camera takes in a view, in an instant, and as she stood waiting for him to speak.

"Miss Sartoris?" he said.

And the voice, though much gentler than that in which he had spoken to Mr. Mordaunt Sapley, was grave, and not without dignity.

"I am Miss Sartoris," assented Claire.

"I have to apologize for disturbing you at so late an hour, Miss Sartoris," he said; "but I found this ornament in the little wood or spinny over yonder, and, guessing that it must belong to you or some lady staying at the house, I thought it best to bring it here at once. The owner would naturally be anxious about it."

"Thank you; I am very much obliged to you," said Claire.

"It belongs to me; I must have dropped it in the woods."

He did not say "I saw you there;" but he took up the spray, and looked at it thoughtfully.

"They are diamonds, and of great value, I suppose?" he said, as he handed it to her; and his dark eyes sought hers.

Claire took the ornament, and glanced at it indifferently.

"Yes; they are diamonds. And I suppose it is of value."

"Then I'm very glad I found it," he said. "But—you'll forgive me—must it not have been very insecurely fastened for you to have dropped it without knowing it?"

"There is only the long hair-pin to which it is attached," said Claire. "Will you not sit down?" she added.

He declined, with a slight movement of his hand.

"I will not detain you," he said. "I was only going to say that it would be as well if you were to fasten it more securely for the future. Some man as poor, but a little more dishonest, may pick it up next time, and then—"

He smiled.

Claire colored, but smiled, too.

"I am afraid one is very careless about such things," she said, "and deserves to lose them; but I didn't make the thing, and"—she looked at it—"I am sure I don't know how to fasten it more securely."

"Permit me," he said, and held out his hand.

He examined the long double pin.

"Nothing could be easier," he said. "You have only to fix a couple of small screws or nuts on the ends of these pins when you've placed the ornament in your hair."

"That would be a great deal of trouble," said Claire.

"Yes," he admitted; "almost as much trouble as looking for it when it is lost. But, I beg your pardon. I am presuming to offer you advice which I'm afraid is not very valuable."

Claire's eloquent lips parted with a smile.

"I don't think it is," she said. "No one could possibly fasten screws on this thing when it was once in the hair."

He laughed, and it was a very pleasant little laugh, as frank as his eyes.

"I might have known I was presuming," he said. "It was the old business of 'fools rushing in where angels feared to tread.' My only excuse is that I meant well." He took a step toward the door as he spoke.

"No excuse is necessary," said Claire. "It was very kind of you to make the suggestion; and I am grateful to you, both for it and the restoration of my spray. Will you tell me to whom I owe my thanks?" she added, with a certain timidity which made her voice sound graver than the occasion required.

He stopped and looked at her steadily.

"My name is Gerald Wayre," he said. "I have to offer you an apology for trespassing," he went on. "I was on the way this evening to the village, and I was tempted to stray off the footpath into the wood. I am aware that in these parts wanton trespass approaches a capital offense; but I hope you'll forgive me."

Claire smiled.

"On this occasion the trespass was a very fortunate one for me," she said. "If you had not gone into the wood you would not have found my spray."

She waited a moment to see if he would refer to the quarrel with Mr. Mordaunt Sapley, and admit that he had seen her; but as he did not do so, she added:

"Are you staying in the village?"

"Yes, for a short time," he said.

Claire was conscious of a singular curiosity respecting him; singular because, as a rule, she felt little curiosity about any one.

"You are an artist?" she asked.

He hesitated a moment.

"Well, I suppose an architect is something of an artist," he said.

"You are an architect?"

"Yes, I suppose I may say so," he replied, "though I have not architected much. I am studying the business. If

is a good excuse for wandering about, and staring at buildings old and new, hideous and otherwise."

"I am afraid you will not find anything very interesting in Regna," said Claire.

"I don't know," he said, as if he were not so certain. "There's an old ruin on the hill over there which looks worth interviewing."

"It is St. Anne's Chapel," said Claire, quickly. Of course, it belonged to her. "If you would like to examine it I will give you the key; the entrance gate is locked. I had forgotten the chapel. But there is nothing else, I think."

"No; excepting this house," he said. "Thank you very much for the key; I shall be very glad to have it."

"Is this house interesting?" asked Claire.

"Oh, yes; a portion of it," he said. "It is almost unique in its way."

"I did not know it," she remarked. "If you would like to examine it, to take sketches, or—whatever it is you do, please do so."

"You are very kind," he said. "But I'm afraid I should be somewhat of a nuisance, should I not? It is not as if the house were unoccupied."

"That does not matter," said Claire. "I suppose you allude to the old wing?"

"Yes," he assented.

"That is almost unoccupied," said Claire, "and you are quite at liberty to examine it."

"Thank you," he said again. "I should like to do so some day, when there is no chance of my being a nuisance. I will wish you good-night now, Miss Sartoria."

They went into the hall together; and Claire suddenly remembered, and said:

"Oh! if you'll wait a moment, I will fetch the key for you."

She disappeared; and, left alone, he stood with his hands behind him, and looked round the hall with the quick, comprehensive glance of an artist. Then he turned his eyes and watched her as she came down the stairs.

The beauty of her face, the grace and refinement of her figure, seemed exquisitely appropriate to their surroundings. She had thrust the diamond spray into her hair, as if glad to get it back, and under this her eyes shone softly, and with a half-pleased, though grave, expression. An old iron key hung upon her white forefinger.

"There is the key," she said. "I hope you will find th

chapel interesting enough to repay you for the trouble of a visit."

"Thank you," he said once again; "I will send the key back." And, with another "good-night," he went out.

Claire stood where he had left her for quite a couple of minutes. She seldom met strangers, and visitors were very rare indeed at the Court, and this adventure—for it might almost be called an adventure—was an event in her life. She recalled his face and his manner, the first so handsome, the latter so full of a kind of pride and frank brusqueness.

Suddenly it occurred to her that he had been rather magisterial with her; he had scolded her, or almost scolded her. And she—had she not been rather too free with a perfect stranger? At the thought the color rose to her pale face. She returned to the drawing-room, and, in answer to Mrs. Lexton's glance of interrogation, said:

"It was some one to see me on—business." She broke off with a smile. "Oh! I'd better tell you, Mary! I had lost my spray, and it was found by this young man who brought it."

Mrs. Lexton laughed.

"My dear Claire! You had really lost it? How lucky to get it again—and so soon! What a terrible temptation to anybody finding it! What was the young man like? What is his name?"

"Oh! he is—just a young man. His name is Gerald Wayre."

"Do you know him?"

"No," said Claire.

She was going to say, "I have never seen him before," but remembered the scene in the woods, and stopped.

"He must be very honest," said Mrs. Lexton. "That ornament must be worth a couple of hundred pounds."

Claire flushed slightly.

"He is a gentleman; at least, I think so."

Mrs. Lexton looked at her curiously.

"I mean that though he was not well dressed—his clothes were not new, were well worn—he looked and spoke like a gentleman."

"He is staying here, I suppose?" said Mrs. Lexton.

"Yes; in the village. He is an architect, or something of the kind, and is traveling to study."

She did not tell Mrs. Lexton that she had given him the key of St. Anne's Chapel; for again it seemed to her that she had been too free with a stranger, and she changed the subject.

They sat and talked for some little time, and then Claire insisted upon Mrs. Lexton going to bed.

After the elder woman had gone, Claire stood by the window, looking out at the night; and, notwithstanding the arrival of her friend, the feeling of loneliness still remained with her. She went to the piano and touched the keys softly, but all through the music she heard Gerald Wayre's voice. And she was angry with herself for not being able to forget him.

CHAPTER IV.

GERALD WAYRE lighted his pipe, and walked through the garden and down the steep village street, until he almost reached the beach; then, turning to the right, he stopped before a thatched cottage inn where he lodged. An old fisherman, as round as a tub and as fat as a porpoise, sat on a seat against the cottage wall, and in a perfect bower of roses. He took his pipe from his mouth, and touched his hat to Gerald.

"Been for a stroll, sir?" he said. "It's a grand night for a walk."

"Yes," said Gerald; and he sat down beside Captain Hawker—nearly every man in Regna was called "captain"—and, tilting his hat back, looked at the moonlit sea.

"That's a fine house you have up on the hill, Captain Hawker," he said.

"Meanin' the Court, sir?" said the old man, with a nod. "Yes, it be; it's the grandest house in these parts, and we're all on us mighty proud on it."

"And justifiably," said Gerald. "To whom does it belong?"

"To the young lady as lives there, Miss Sartoris," said Captain Hawker. "It did belong to Lord Wharton, but he left it to her. She's the landlady of all of us, as you may say, and quite like a queen here."

"Do you see much of her?" asked Gerald.

"She comes down along now and again, sir; but not very often, an' mostly in the evenin'. She's a very kind-hearted young lady, but a bit proud-like, as she's reason to be, you may say. She ain't one of those ladies as pokes their nose into cottages with tracts and advice; ain't familiar in any way, indeed; but she's good to the poor, and has always a pleasant word for the children."

Gerald smiled. The rough picture seemed to hit off the

stately girl, with the clear oval face and dark-gray eyes, quite exactly.

"And does she live in that big place alone?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; at least, she did, but I'm told as there is a lady come to stop with her."

"Poor girl!" said Gerald to himself.

The captain took his pipe out of his mouth, and looked at him with some surprise.

"'Poor,' sir, did you say, beggin' your pardon? She's as rich as Creases; simply rollin' in money."

"Just so!" said Gerald. "I meant that it was a great responsibility."

"Ah, yes, sir," said Captain Hawker. "I see what you mean—the estate and all that; but Mr. Sapley looks after that; he's the agent as we pays our rents to, and manages the estate."

At that moment a young girl came out of the cottage door, a girl with a pretty and rather delicate face, with soft brown hair, and soft brown eyes, and soft red lips. She was neatly dressed in a frock of gray merino, by no means badly made. She was Lucy Hawker, the captain's daughter.

"Hasn't Mr. Wayre come back, father?" she asked. "His supper is ready, and spoiling."

Gerald rose; and she started, and the color flew, in good, honest fashion, to her pretty face.

"Here I am, Miss Lucy," said Gerald, "and spoiling for the supper."

He entered the sitting-room, upon which the outer door opened, and found a plain but well-cooked meal awaiting him. There were fresh herrings—Regna is famous for its herrings—mutton cutlets—Downshire, in which Regna is situated, is famous for its mutton—a junket, and strawberry jam.

Lucy waited upon him, with downcast eyes, and a timid little smile playing about the corners of her lips, as if she enjoyed his enjoyment of the fare. Now and again he spoke to her.

"If you treat me so well, Miss Lucy," he said, as he helped himself to a second serve of junket, "I shall never want to leave Regna."

The girl flushed with pleasure.

"I'm glad you're pleased, sir," she said; and her voice *grew as soft as her hair, or her eyes, or her lips.*

"Pleased? Who wouldn't be? My dear Miss Lucy, it's a *upper fit for a prince.* If you only knew what suppers I have

eaten—a crust of dry bread in the Pyrenees, half a watermelon in Naples, a slice of buffalo-hump in the Rockies, a basin of porridge in the Trossachs, a steak of cod in Newfoundland—”

“You seem to have been everywhere, sir,” she said.

“Very nearly,” he assented, carelessly. “But in no place where the cooking is better done, and the attendance more charming.”

The girl’s face blushed a rosy red as she gathered the cloth together in her hand, and left the room. Gerald lighted his pipe, and leaned back in his chair with indolent content, and looked round him.

In one corner of the room was an easel; a couple of guns, and as many fishing-rods, stood on brackets on the wall; a small pile of books was upon a side table, upon which also stood a box of instruments used by architects. A thick mackintosh hung on a hook behind the door; waders and fishing-boots stood in a corner of the room. Gerald looked at them all in indolent content, then he drew a large and rusty key from his pocket and looked at that, and as he looked at it, a vision of the pale oval face rose before him, and he thought of Miss Sartoris, the owner of Court Regna.

Presently, as if the contemplation of her wealth had reminded him of money matters, he took a purse from his pocket and emptied its contents upon the table. There were five sovereigns, a few shillings and a few coppers. “All my worldly wealth,” he said to himself. “It will not last me long, and then— Ah, well! enough for the day is the evil thereof;” and he rose and went out to the rough terrace overlooking the sea, and smoked the pipe, which is at once peace and contentment to the poor in pocket.

About the same time Mr. Sapley sat in his den, bending over some deeds and papers. He had built for himself an ugly, square house on a piece of land just outside the Regna estate, so as to be well in sight of things; and he had also an office in the neighboring town. Mr. Sapley had a great many houses in the locality, and pieces and scraps of land all over the place. He had started life as an errand-boy to a firm of solicitors in Downshire, had worked himself up in the usual way, and had gradually absorbed his former employers’ business. Indeed, Mr. Sapley had a knack of absorbing things. It is a very useful and profitable knack. He lent money to small and struggling builders; and they got smaller, and ceased to struggle. Mr. Sapley absorbed them. Not only small builders and other tradesmen, but people of more consequence went to Mr. Sapley in their difficulties, and, sooner

or late, they found themselves in his power, and Mr. Sapley picked their bones.

No one could openly accuse him of dishonesty, whatever they thought. He always went to work in a strictly legal fashion, and nightly slept the sleep of the just. It was said that he cared for no one but himself; but this was not true. There was one other person in the world for whom he had an affection, and that was his only son, Mordaunt. It was for him that Mr. Sapley was hoarding up money, and in him that his ambition centered. He had sent him to Oxford, allowed him a liberal allowance, and brought him up to think himself some one of importance. And Mr. Sapley intended that Mordaunt should be some one of importance. Between the county families and a country solicitor a very wide gulf yawns; Sapley meant his son to cross that gulf, meant him to become "county family" himself.

There was only one way of achieving this ambition, and that was by marrying into the local aristocracy. The local aristocracy would have been both indignant and amused if they had had any notion of Mr. Sapley's idea, but Mr. Sapley was cautious, and "moled" along underground in silence, waiting his opportunity. As he bent over his papers—most of them were headed "Court Regna Estate"—the door opened and Mordaunt entered. He had washed himself, and brushed the dirt from his clothes, but there was a dark mark on his face, and doubtless several others on various parts of his body. He looked sullen and ill-tempered, and scowled as his father looked up with a, "Well, Mordaunt, ready for supper?"

"It does not much matter whether I am or not; there's no supper ready. This house is shamefully mismanaged. Why don't you get a decent housekeeper and a proper staff of servants, instead of that old hag, Prosser?"

Mr. Sapley smiled, and showed his fang-like teeth.

"Prosser's cheap, Mordaunt. The more servants, the more waste. Supper will be ready directly. Did you see Grimley?"

"Yes," replied Mordaunt, "and he says he can't pay."

"They all say that," remarked his father.

"He says that the crops have been bad, and he has had a deal of sickness."

"They all say that also. I'll be sworn he has a nest-egg put away on the sly; and it does not matter if he has not; there is enough stock to pay us. We must sell him up Mordaunt."

Mordaunt nodded callously as he dropped into a chair and put his legs on another. He had been to a university and associated with gentlemen, but his speech and his manners were those of the rampant cad when he was alone with his father, or his equals and inferiors. It is a question whether Oxford and Cambridge do not turn out more cads and snobs than any other educational establishments, especially of late years, now that every flourishing tradesman sends his son to "college," to make a gentleman of him. But his father saw nothing wrong, and looked at him admiringly. He considered Mordaunt's "free and easy" manners quite distinguished.

"There's some papers I wanted you to glance over," he said, "but you seem tired. What's that mark on your face?" he broke off to ask.

Mordaunt reddened resentfully.

"Oh, nothing," he replied, sullenly; "I fell down. No, I don't feel inclined to bother with anything in the way of business to-night. I suppose it's something connected with the Court estate? By the way," he went on with affected carelessness, but with a sidelong glance at his father, "why don't these infernal keepers keep a sharper look-out over the place? All sorts of bounders and ragamuffins are trespassing on the grounds. I came across one to-night, and he was abusive, the scoundrel! I took his name, and I was half a mind to give him a good thrashing. I shall summon him to-morrow."

"Better not," said Mr. Sapley; "I don't think Miss Sartoris would like it."

"I suppose we manage the estate, not she," said Mordaunt, insolently.

Mr. Sapley pursed his lips.

"Yes; that is true. But she is the mistress," and he showed his teeth. "It wouldn't do to offend her. She's very different to the old lord; you could do what you liked with him, if you only knew how to manage him; and I think I knew that." He grinned cunningly. "It's not so easy with Miss Sartoris."

"She looks quiet enough," remarked Mordaunt.

Mr. Sapley shook his head.

"Looks are deceptive, especially with women. The girl's got a will of her own. Only yesterday she wouldn't sign the paper to eject those Styles; and she doesn't like the tourists and excursionists interfered with. Thinks the place almost belongs as much to the public as to her. No; I don't think she would like you to summon any one for trespass."

"She must be a fool!" said Mordaunt, elegantly.

"No, she isn't a fool," said his father, looking down at his papers with half-closed eyes, like a bird of prey peering at the mangled body of a victim. "Oh, no; she's not a fool; and the man who bought her for one would lose by the transaction. Women are deceptive, Mordaunt; you'd know that if you'd had my experience."

"She's not the first woman I've seen," remarked Mordaunt, under his breath.

Mr. Sapley turned his papers over with a preoccupied air, glancing covertly under his bushy brows at his son's sullen and downcast face.

"She's a good-looking girl, don't you think, Mordaunt?"

Mordaunt yawned.

"Oh, yes! Good-looking enough," he said.

"How do you get on with her, now?" asked Mr. Sapley in a casual kind of way.

"Oh! well enough," replied Mordaunt. "She's rather too proud and starchy for me. I hate that kind of thing! She looks at me as if she scarcely saw me, and speaks to me as if I were a kind of upper servant. I'm an Oxford man and a gentleman; and I tell you flat, I don't like it."

Mr. Sapley shifted uneasily on his chair.

"Of course, of course!" he said. "But you must make allowances, Mordy. She's not only the owner of Court Regna, but a distant relation of Lord Wharton and one of the county families."

"Yes; and she seems to remind you of it every time she speaks to you. I hate your county families! They behave themselves as if they were gods. They crow loud enough on their own dunghills; they'd sing a great deal smaller if they were up in London. They'd find their level there."

"I dare say," assented Mr. Sapley; "but they are gods in their own places, and we've got to pretend to kneel and worship them—especially when we make money out of them." He touched the papers caressingly.

There was silence for a minute or two, during which Mordaunt rolled himself a cigarette, without asking permission, and blew the smoke across his father's face.

"She'll be expected to make a great marriage," said Mr. Sapley.

"I dare say," assented Mordaunt.

"*She's a very beautiful girl, with all deference to you, Mordaunt; and she's the mistress of Regna. She might aim very high.*"

"She may aim as high as a prince," said Mordaunt, "for all I care."

Mr. Sapley eyed him curiously.

"It would be a very nice thing for a man to step into," he said. "Regna is almost unique in its way, and the man who married her would be quite a personage. He'd be one of the county families."

"I dare say," assented Mordaunt, again, with another yawn.

"I wonder who it will be?" mused Mr. Sapley, watching his son's face still covertly. "Miss Sartoris is a girl who would follow her own fancy. She wouldn't care who the man was, so long as she liked him."

Mordaunt took the cigarette from his lips, and looked at his father with a little more attention.

"What are you driving at, governor?" he asked.

Mr. Sapley smiled mysteriously, and shuffled on his chair.

"I was just thinking, Mordy," he said, "what advantages you have got compared with what I had. I began life in quite an humble way; I can remember sweeping out Goodchild's office—"

Mr. Mordaunt, the Oxford man, reddened resentfully.

"What's the use of going back to all that?" he asked.

"Yes, I swept out his office," continued Mr. Sapley, looking straight before him, as if he were regarding the past. "And I used to hold Goodchild's horse when he went for a ride, and touch my hat to the clients when they gave me a shilling."

Mr. Mordaunt moved uneasily on his chair.

"And then I got a stool at one of the desks, and addressed the letters and copied the deeds. I must have had a head on my shoulders, even in those days, for I remembered what those deeds were about. I could recite some of them now. I worked my way up to confidential clerk. Old Goodchild was an easy-going fool, as well as old, and he got to rely on me; he had to make me partner. I got the business into my own hands; then I dissolved partnership, and set up for myself. Nearly all the business followed me. Old Goodchild retired on a few hundreds a year, and I took the whole of his practice."

"What's the use of going over all this?" asked Mordaunt.

Mr. Sapley continued as if his elegant son had not interrupted him:

"It's all nonsense to say a man struggles hard; it all came easy to me. Before I was five-and-twenty, I was agent to three estates, and had got the practice of the whole place."

Then I got Court Regna. I'd had my eye on that for a long while, for I knew there were pickings to be made out of it. Lord Wharton never interfered with anything, and I've had it all my own way."

He touched the deeds again lovingly.

"What's the use—" began Mordaunt. But Mr. Sapley continued:

"I'm what is called a rich man; but, as you said, though you meant it in another way, what's the use? All the gentry here remember me sweeping out the office and holding the horses. With you it's different."

"I should hope so," muttered Mordaunt, dutifully, under his breath.

"You are an Oxford man and a gentleman. The world's open to you; you can look up boldly to things that I could never dare lift my eyes to. You'll be a rich man, Mordaunt." And the man's voice grew softly triumphant, in strange discordance with his hard, vulture-like face. "There's no knowing what heights you could climb to. Why, you might—"

He glanced at Mordaunt half cunningly, half fearfully.

"What are you driving at?" asked Mordaunt, again under his breath.

Mr. Sapley pushed the papers from him with his claw-like hand, and leaned back in his chair.

"There's nothing you couldn't attain to. I've made a gentleman of you; you haven't swept out an office, or held horses. You've got the college manner and the college tone, and you've got some of your poor mother's good looks. It all lies within your grasp." There was a silence. Mordaunt had allowed his cigarette to go out, and it dropped from his fingers as he stared at his father's hawk-like face.

"What *are* you driving at?" he said, under his breath.

"If I were in your place," went on Mr. Sapley, ignoring the question, "I should look around and seek my opportunity. You're young, and you've got, or will have, money. You can marry well. Here's Court Regna, for instance."

Mordaunt sat bolt upright.

"Court Regna?" he repeated, in amazement.

Mr. Sapley glanced at him with a cunning smile.

"Court Regna," he repeated. "It's owned by a young *girl—unmarried*. And the man who marries her will step *into one of the prettiest properties in England, will become one of the county families.*"

"Me marry Miss Sartoris!" exclaimed Mordaunt, forgetting his grammar, and sitting bolt upright.

"Why not?" snarled Mr. Sapley, bending forward, with his sharp eyes fixed on his son's wide-open ones. "You are young, good-looking, and have opportunities of meeting her which few men have. If I were in your place—"

Mordaunt laughed discordantly.

"You must be mad, guv'nor," he said. "Miss Sartoris wouldn't look at me. She regards me as a kind of servant. She doesn't know what I'm like. She scarcely bows when we meet; she wouldn't know me outside Court Regna."

Mr. Sapley showed his teeth, and hissed half contemptuously, half defiantly:

"Bah! You haven't half the pluck I had. Oh, I'm not blaming you; it's the difference in the training. Faint heart never won fair lady. Doesn't the prospect allure you? To be the husband of a beautiful girl like that. To be the master of Court Regna, one of the show places of England—the world!"

Mordaunt threw himself back in his chair, and laughed scornfully.

"You're dreaming, guv'nor," he said. "She wouldn't look at me. I'm just the son of her agent, and no more."

A dusky red overspread Mr. Sapley's face. He looked uglier than ever.

"You're an Oxford man, and a gentleman," he said. "And suppose I help you?"

"You help me!" exclaimed Mordaunt, leaning forward.

Mr. Sapley bit his lip, as if he had said too much.

"Well, I might help you," he said. "Who knows? Anyway, the thing is not impossible; it is less than impossible, it is probable."

Mr. Mordaunt stared at him. The young man's commonplace, and rather sordid face was alive with a kind of cuteness.

He had hitherto looked up to Miss Sartoris as a sort of queen. He had admired her beauty, but as a subject might admire that of an empress. She had seemed something far and away beyond his reach. And now to be told that he might become her husband, might become the master of Court Regna, might enter the charmed circle of the county families!

It took his breath away. He leaned forward, the bruise Gerald Wayre had made upon his face showing plainly, his small eyes alight with the light reflected from his father's.

"Do you mean what you say?" he demanded.

"I mean what I say," responded Mr. Sapley. "I have had my eye on it for a long time, ever since you came home. But it rests with you; you've got all the cards, and if you play them properly, you'll win. Just think of it! Master of Court Regna—and your father swept out Goodchild's office!"

Mordaunt rose and paced up and down the small room.

"It seems impossible!" he said. "How can you help me?"

Mr. Sapley gathered the papers together with a sweep of his hand.

"Never you mind," he said. "You'll know all in good time. If you want my advice, I say, see as much of her as you can. Never mind her proud and haughty ways. They don't count." He showed his teeth. "You can pay her back for them when you're married. Go and see her on business as often as you can. Get into her confidence—that's the way I always acted. Study her likes and dislikes and flatter her. Flatter her, Mordaunt! It's the quickest way to a woman's heart. I'll keep in the background as much as possible. Let her think that you, and not me, are necessary to her. She's all alone here, and you've got the first chance. Make the best use of your time, and when you've got a footing with her, come to me, and I'll do the rest!" He looked up at his son through eyes made into slits, and showed his fangs in an encouraging smile.

Mordaunt leaned his arms upon the table, and stared at his father almost breathlessly.

The prospect unfolded before him was simply dazzling. To be the husband of Claire Sartoris, the master of Court Regna! The mere thought bewildered him.

Father and son regarded each other in a pregnant silence.

The door opened and an old woman thrust in her head.

"Supper's ready!" she said in a harsh voice.

They went into the room which served as dining and drawing-room, where the table was spread for supper; cold meat, cheese, and a stony-looking pie. Neither of them eat much. They were both thinking of the alluring prospect spread out before them. Presently Mordaunt pushed his plate away and rose.

"I'll take a turn," he said. Mr. Sapley nodded and filled a long clay pipe, the long clay pipe which was always an eyesore to his elegant son. Mr. Mordaunt crossed the Regna grounds by a side path, and went down to the pier, and descended by the stone steps to the beach. He was sheltered

from observation from the village, and from everything excepting the boats at sea. He lighted a cigarette and smoked for a few minutes, then he whistled sharply, and after a few minutes there came a sound like a bird, and presently a young girl tripped quickly down the steps of the pier and joined him.

It was Captain Hawker's daughter, Lucy.

Mordaunt Sapley went to meet her, and put his arm round her waist, and kissed her.

"I thought you were never coming!" he said.

"And I thought the same of you," she said, breathlessly.

"How late you are!"

"I have been engaged—on business," he said. "You heard my whistle?"

"Yes," she said, "I have been waiting for it. It's well I didn't hear it before, for I had to get our lodger's supper."

He drew her close to him, and smoothed the soft brown hair from her forehead. "Did you think I wasn't coming?" he said, "and was it frightened?"

She nestled closer to him. "I thought you would come," she said, "but I mustn't stay long, Mordaunt. Father and the gentleman are both outside the cottage, and they may see us." He kissed her, taking his cigarette out of his mouth to do so.

"Bother your father and your lodger!" he said.

There was a silence. The girl leaned her head on his shoulder, her eyes turned to his face.

"What a lovely night, Mordaunt," she murmured. "Have you—have you spoken to your father yet?"

He shifted uneasily, but smiled encouragingly. "Not yet, Lucy," he said. "There's plenty of time. What are you shuddering at?" for a shiver had run through her.

"Speak to him at once, dear!" she said. "Tell him—oh, tell him!"

"All in good time," he said, easily. "I must break it to him gently. You don't mistrust me, Lucy?"

"No, no!" she said, eagerly, as if she were trying to convince herself. "I don't distrust you, dear; but you said that you would speak to him; and I want to know. I am afraid that father will find out, that he will see, that some one will see us—our lodger!"

"Who is your lodger?" asked Mordaunt.

"A gentleman," she replied. "A Mr. Gerald Wayre?"

Mordaunt started. "They must not know!" he said.

"Not till you have spoken to your father," she agreed.

cheerfully. "Oh, Mordaunt, I am afraid of what he will say! Do you think he will be very angry?"

Mr. Mordaunt kissed her hair, and flung the end of his cigarette into a pool left by the tide.

"You've not said anything to any one?" he asked.

"I've not told any one!" she breathed, drawing herself away from him.

"That's right," he said, "don't say anything to any one—but of course you wouldn't. It will all come right directly. I'll speak to my father—"

"And—and we shall be married!" she murmured, hiding her face on his breast.

"Yes, of course we shall be married," he assented, fumbling for his tobacco and cigarette paper.

CHAPTER V.

THE next morning Gerald climbed the hill to St. Anne's Chapel. It was a lovely morning; the sky was bright, and the sea was blue, and a breeze coming direct from Labrador made the trees round the Court musical.

Gerald had his sketch-book in his pocket, and his pipe in his mouth, and, having had a good breakfast, and being young and strong, and of a cheerful spirit, was in the best of humors.

The path up to the ruin wound in zigzag fashion until it came to a little lawn-like space in front of the old iron gate, which admitted to the second inclosure of the chapel itself. Gerald pulled out his key to unlock the gate, when he saw that it was heavily padlocked, and that his key was useless. The ruin looked tempting, and Gerald was rather disappointed. He walked round the railings; but they were all in good condition and not climbable, and, with a shrug of the shoulders, he sat down on a little mound, and proceeded to sketch that side of the chapel which presented itself to him.

While he was at work, he was asking himself what he should do with the key. Should he send it back by one of the fisher-boys, or should he walk up to the Court with it himself? If he did the latter, perhaps Miss Sartoris would think him intrusive, would think he wanted to force his acquaintance upon her, because he had been fortunate enough to find her diamond ornament.

"No, I had better send it back," he said to himself. "*The less you have to do with dames of high degree the better, my dear fellow. You'll send the key back with a*

polite expression of thanks, and, in the language of the classics, take your hook."

As he arrived at this decision, he heard a peculiar noise down the hill behind him, and, listening, found presently that it was an approaching horse. He craned his head to look, and saw a lady riding up a narrow track. It was a very narrow track, and not altogether a safe one; but the rider appeared quite at her ease, and sat her horse as if she were cantering on a level road. Gerald was himself a good rider, and he watched her with critical admiration, which changed to surprise as he saw that it was Miss Sartoris.

She looked more beautiful in the young man's eyes in her well-fitting riding-habit even than she had done in her evening-dress of the night before; indeed, she was grace personified as she sat lightly and firmly in her saddle, seeming part of the beautiful horse she rode.

"You have plenty of pluck, my lady!" said Gerald to himself, as she left the narrow track, and came at a canter up the steep hill, a slip on which would have precipitated her into the depth below.

Fronting the chapel, she pulled up, and sat looking thoughtfully before her. The exercise, perhaps the danger, had bestowed a tinge of color on the clear ivory of her face; her eyes were glowing rather than sparkling. And Gerald sat and watched her, absorbed in her beauty, while one could count twenty; then, remembering his manners, he rose and raised his hat.

She did not start; but turned her head slowly, and bowed slightly.

"You have come to sketch the chapel?" she said. "Have you not been inside?"

"Not yet," he said. "The fact is, the gate is padlocked as well as locked, and I can't get in."

She looked at the gate with, it seemed to Gerald, a touch of annoyance.

"I did not know there was a padlock," she said. "I do not know who has put it there—except it was Mr. Sapley. The ordinary lock was sufficient. And can you not climb over?"

Gerald looked at the spear-headed railings.

"Well, I could," he said, "but I have not too many clothes, and these would run some risk."

"Is there no way of getting in?" she asked.

"Only by unlocking the padlock, or breaking it," he said.
"Please break it," she said.

There was a faint tone of command in her voice, as if she were still rather annoyed.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," he said, "thank you. I am making a sketch of this south side."

"Do you mean you have nothing here to break it with?" she asked.

"Oh, no!" he responded, glancing at a piece of rock.

"Then, will you break it, please?"

There was still more of command in her voice, and, without another word, he took up a piece of rock, and with a blow or two shattered the padlock.

"Thank you," she said. "You can go in now when you please."

"I will finish this sketch first." Then, with a dread that she was going, and with a desire to keep her, "What a fine morning. That is a beautiful horse you are riding, Miss Sartoris."

She drew her gauntleted hand along the horse's glossy neck.

"She is a very good horse," she said.

"And a clever one. She came up that steep track splendidly. It is rather a dangerous ride."

"She is used to it, and I am used to her," said Claire.

"So I saw," he remarked. "There are very few ladies who would care to come up that break-neck place even on foot."

Claire looked over her shoulder at the track.

"I have never noticed that there was any danger," she said.

She leaned a little forward, in so graceful an attitude that a sudden temptation assailed Gerald. He left the chapel, and began to make a rapid sketch of her on one side of his paper.

"Do you paint in oils?" asked Claire.

"Sometimes," said Gerald, seizing the excuse to look at her.

"You are an artist as well as an architect, then?" she said.

"Did I say I was an architect? Well, I suppose I am. I've been so many things."

Claire looked down at him with a veiled curiosity. She saw, now, in the full morning light, how handsome he was. There was something in his face more interesting than regularity of features.

"You've been so many things?" she repeated.

He nodded.

"Yes; I am what the world calls an adventurer, Miss Sartoris."

"What is that?" asked Claire.

"Well, in the old days it mean a soldier of fortune, a man who sold his sword to the highest bidder, one who went a-sailing in search of new lands, or somebody else's ship and treasure; it meant all sorts of romantic things. Nowadays it means a kind of vagabond, a ne'er-do-well, who gets his living in odd ways, and is always regarded as a kind of disreputable character whom it is best to avoid."

"You are not very charitable to yourself," said Claire.

She spoke almost coldly, to conceal her increased interest.

He laughed a short and not unmusical laugh.

"You asked me, and I told you the truth," he said. "I have been an adventurer—that is, vagabond—ever since I can remember. (If I can only keep her sitting still another ten minutes I shall have got her!) At the early age of fifteen I ran away to sea, and worked my passage out to America in a sailing ship. So you may say that I am a sailor. Out in America I worked my way—by breaking stones, chopping wood, and similar intellectual occupations—to the mines. I worked in the mines for two years."

"So that you you are a miner," said Claire, absently.

"So that I am a miner," he assented, trying to indicate the exquisite wave in her hair. "Mining is not an exhilarating pursuit. There is too much 'tailings' about it."

Claire leaned her elbow upon her horse's neck, and looked at him.

"What are—tailings?" she inquired, with a kind of reluctant curiosity.

"Tailings are, so to speak, the dregs of the ore that fall at the bottom of the stamping machine, the machine that stamps out the precious metal from the rock. There still remains some of the silver in these tailings, and they have to be washed to separate the metal from them. It is a maddening, a soul-destroying occupation. I threw it up and went cattle-driving; so that you may call me a cowboy."

"And did you like that better?" asked Claire.

"Very much," he said, beginning to sketch in rapidly the body of the horse. "It is the most delightful of all lives, spent in the open air, mostly in solitude, with the best of horses to ride, and Nature an open book before you. That was life."

"Why did you leave it?" she asked. Then she bit her lip, angry with herself for putting the question. She drew herself up, with a sudden resolve and hauteur, which he had noticed *on the previous night*. But he was absorbed in his *stealthy work*, and did not notice her expression now.

"Because of a little quarrel with my employer," he said, quite frankly. "He tried to rob me of my wages—wages earned by the sweat of my brow, and very often at the risk of my neck. We settled it in the usual way."

She did not ask how this time, but inquiry looked from her lovely eyes, and spoke from her mute lips.

"Every little dispute over there is settled by the revolver," he said. "It is more expeditious than the law, and cheaper. He fired at me and missed me. I then 'covered' him, as they call it, and made him count out the money on a stone half-way between us. So we parted. Then I went back to the cities, to a place called Ariona. They wanted to build a jail there—they always want a jail directly a town grows prosperous; it is an outward and visible sign of civilization. There was no one there who knew how to draw a plan out, and as I knew no less than the others, I offered. So I built the jail at Ariona—and the mayor thereof was the first prisoner. Embezzled the town funds. I architected several jails, churches, and other public buildings for other places. That's why I am an architect—but I am afraid I am boring you." He had nearly finished the horse.

"No!" she said. That was all.

"I had made some money, and I put it into a mine. I might as well have put it into the gutter. Then I started life again with one suit of clothes and two dollars. The president of the mine, who had made a large fortune out of the same enterprises, said he was very sorry for me, and knowing that I was a bit of an artist, said that I might paint his wife's portrait."

He looked up with a smile, and though Claire endeavored to look coldly neutral, the smile was reflected in her eyes.

"The lady was fat, fair, and forty. I made her slim, a beautiful blonde, and five-and-twenty. She said it was life-like, quite life-like. Her friends said—well, I don't know what they said, but they all wanted their portraits painted by the same truthful hand. I became the fashionable painter of Gip's Sling. So that's why you can call me an artist, if you wish to flatter me." He was bestowing a few loving touches to the folds of her habit.

"I might have been at Gip's Sling now, painting ladies, but—well, even the portrait painter has a conscience. Mine grew restive. I fled, leaving a portrait half finished, and took to the wilds again. I hunted with the Indians for over a year, learned their language, slept in their wigwams, and of much store of fur and hide. I was called 'The White unter,' because I was rather ready with my Winchester."

and I had become so like an Indian that on several occasions my fellow-whites, who chanced to meet me, travelers and traders, took me for the noble red-man, and talked Indian, or made signs."

Claire drew a long breath. It was like Desdemona listening to Othello.

"I fancy I should have spent the remainder of my days with those children of the forest, but one morning there happened to come a bank of clouds across the sky that looked like cliffs. I thought of the cliffs of old England, and a sudden homesickness fell upon me and took possession of me. I sold my skins and feathers to the chief, and that same night rode out of the camp, and straight for the coast, and took ship for England; and so came back to the land of my birth, which I had not seen since a boy."

He tilted his hat back from his forehead, and looked up at her with a grave smile.

Claire only half awoke from the spell which his story had cast over her.

"Doubtless you are glad to get back to your friends." Feeling that she must say something.

The smile died away from his face, and it grew graver.

"I should have been if I had had any," he said, very quietly. "But I haven't. I knew no one in England."

"Your relations?" said Claire again, reluctantly.

"I have none," he said. "I never knew my father or my mother. I was brought up by a couple who had had charge of me since I was a child; it was from them I ran away. But I am quite sure I have wearied you to death, Miss Sartoris, and probably disgusted you with this choice sample of egotism. I assure you I am not in the habit of recounting my adventures in this wholesale fashion; indeed, I don't think I have ever mentioned them to any one before," and he frowned slightly, as if he were puzzled, and rather annoyed with himself for having been so confidential.

"You have not tired me," said Claire. "It has been very—very interesting. I do not think many men have had such a varied and adventurous life."

"It's to be hoped not," he said, with a faint smile.

"It does not sound altogether an unhappy one," remarked Claire.

He laughed.

"Oh, no!" and the laugh died away, and a touch of melancholy came into the dark eyes.

"It has been rather a lonely and solitary one," he said, gazing at the sketch.

"Have you finished it?" asked Claire.

"Yes; just finished it," he replied, absently.

"Will you let me see it?" she asked.

It was an awkward request.

He reddened slightly and looked confused; then he said:

"Certainly; one moment!"

He took out his penknife and rapidly cut off his sketch portrait of her, then took the sketch of the chapel to her.

She bent down and looked at it.

"I thought you said you had finished it?" she remarked, innocently.

"Oh; not quite," he said. "As much as I meant to do this morning."

"It will be very good," said Claire.

"Thank you," he said, humbly. "I will go into the chapel now and look round."

Claire gathered her reins together as if about to ride off, then she said:

"Perhaps the door is locked also; I will see."

She slipped from the saddle, and flinging the bridle over the railings, passed through the gate and tried the old oaken door. It was open, and Gerald, removing his hat, followed her in. She noticed the little act of reverence, and was pleased. They looked round together in silence for a moment.

"It is a beautiful old building," he said, "and in a wonderful state of preservation, considering its age. It is Norman."

"You tell it by the—"

"By the arches and the lines over them," he said, "as well as by other signs. That is the effigy of a Norman knight. There are tombs here," he added, as he bent down to examine the floor.

"Yes," said Claire; "some of the Whartons are buried here. Lord Wharton was very proud of the chapel, and had great care taken of it."

He poked about, pushing the grass aside and disclosing time-worn memorial slabs.

"The lichen has eaten away most of the inscriptions," he said, "but some of the letters still remain; one feels them better than sees them." He passed his hand over the stone.

Claire bent down on the other side of it.

"Is that so?" she asked.

"Yes; see!" he said, "or, rather, feel."

Claire was much interested. She took off the gauntlet from her right hand and passed her finger softly over the stone, her eyes half closed.

"You are feeling in the wrong place," he said; "there are no letters there. Permit me," he took her hand and guided it along the faintly marked line.

As his hand inclosed hers firmly, yet gently, a strange thrill ran through Claire, beginning at her finger tips, and running through her whole frame. She felt a desire to draw her hand away from his, and yet an incapacity to do so. She glanced at him through her half-closed eyes, her breath coming a little faster, her dark brows drawn into a slight frown. But he seemed quite unconscious, and quite engrossed in their strangely mutual task.

"Can you feel anything?" he asked.

His face was of necessity very close to hers, and its nearness confused her and made it difficult for her to speak on the instant. At last she said, and coldly: "I think I felt a letter."

"What is it?" he asked.

"It is a G," she said.

"Yes; and the next?"

"Is it an E?" she asked.

He passed his fingers over the letter and looked at her abstractedly.

"You are right," he said.

"And the next is an R or a K," she said.

"It is an R. How quick you are! A woman's fingers are so sensitive. That is why they make the best fishermen, as an Irishman would say."

She wanted to draw her hand away, but though she could have done so now, she did not like to do so.

"The next letter has quite gone," she said, "but the next is an L and then a D." She spelled out the word as far as she had deciphered it, "GER—LD."

She raised her eyes and looked at him.

"It must be Gerald," she said.

He laughed. "Yes; my name, strange to say; and yet not strange; it is a common enough name."

"It was one of Lord Wharton's names," said Claire.

"Yes," he said, "no doubt it is a family name, and we should find it on other tombs here."

He still held her hand as if he had forgotten he held it.

She drew it away and stood upright and looked round

holding her breath for a moment, and with a faint color mantling in her cheek, but when he looked up at her the color had gone, and she was as cold, or, rather, reserved, as usual. She glanced at the watch on her wrist.

"I must go," she said; "I hope you will find some interesting things to draw here."

"Thank you," he said, half absently. "But I don't expect I shall find anything more interesting than the sketch I took outside;" and his hand slipped into his jacket-pocket where the sketch of her lay hidden.

"Good-morning," she said.

"You will let me help you to mount?" he said, as he raised his hat.

"No, thank you," she said, rather quickly, without turning her head; and she passed out.

Gerald Wayre stood for a moment looking at the door-way through which she had disappeared. It seemed to him that the chapel had become dark all of a sudden. He looked down at the tomb abstractedly, then he stooped and picked up something; it was her gauntlet. He held it in his palm and gazed at it thoughtfully; he could have almost fancied that it retained the warmth of her long, shapely hand, whose touch seemed still to linger about his fingers. He pressed the glove against his cheek; then, with a flush and an impatient exclamation, he flung the gauntlet from him and turned his back upon it.

But a moment or two afterward he glanced over his shoulder at it; it seemed to have a reproachful expression, as if it were a sentient human thing, and with another half-angry, half-impatient exclamation, he strode to it, picked it up and thrust it into his bosom. There it seemed like a warm, living thing, nestling against his heart.

His lips grew tight, and he frowned.

"What has come to me?" he said under his breath. "I must be mad!"

CHAPTER VI.

CLAIRE rode down the perilous path, and long before she had got to the road at the bottom, she missed her glove. She was rather annoyed at her carelessness, for gauntlet riding-gloves are not to be bought in every country town; but she felt that she could not go back after it. Mr. Wayre was there still. She would go back for it to-morrow morning. As she went at a gentle trot along the road that winds to

the Court, she saw Mr. Mordaunt Sapley coming toward her. He raised his hat, and stopped, as she came up with him, and Claire pulled up.

"Good-morning," he said, with the mixture of familiarity and respect in which he always addressed her, and which Claire did not like. "I was going to the Court, Miss Sartoris; my father wishes me to speak to you about Grimley's farm. They are behind-hand with their rent, and he thinks they ought to have notice to quit; he would have given them notice last week, but he—er—fancied that you did not wish him to."

"Are they very much behind?" said Claire, hesitatingly. Lord Wharton had never interfered with Mr. Sapley, who had, in reality, ruled the estate, and she wished to follow in Lord Wharton's path as closely as possible; but the idea of ejecting a tenant, of treating any one of them harshly, was repugnant to her. "Grimley broke his arm last autumn," she said, "and the harvest was bad; I do not like turning him out of the farm; he has been there a great many years." Her eyes grew pitiful. "I should be glad if Mr. Sapley could let him remain and give him another chance."

Mr. Mordaunt Sapley looked up at her with as much admiration in his small eyes as he dared display.

"You are so kind-hearted, Miss Sartoris!" he said, with an ingratiating smile, and the finnikin Oxford drawl, which Claire disliked as much as she disliked his manner. "Of course, he ought to go; a man has no right to stop on a farm when he can not pay the rent, and we have been very lenient with Grimley. My father has to do his duty by the estate, you know, Miss Sartoris. He has only your interest at heart."

"I am quite sure of that," said Claire, "and I should not venture to interfere in any way."

"Oh, the place is yours," he said, coming a little nearer, and looking up at her in a way that made Claire's face grow colder and more reserved. "Your word is our law, and we are all your very humble but willing slaves."

Claire tried to smile.

"I don't know that I require any slaves, Mr. Sapley," she said; "but you are very kind; and I shall be glad if your father can let Grimley remain."

"I am sure he will," said Mr. Mordaunt, "especially as *you desire it so much.*" He smiled very impressively, and *laid his hand upon the horse's neck.* She seemed to resent *his touch, though she had accepted Gerald's caress willingly*

enough, and Claire resented it also; it was almost as if Mr. Mordaunt Sapley had laid his hand upon her arm. She drew herself up unconsciously, and her brows went straight.

"Good-morning," she said, with that tone which a woman uses when she draws herself aloof from the person she addresses, and with a cold bow rode away from him.

The smile died away from Mr. Mordaunt's face as he looked after her, and his lips moved as if he were swearing under his breath; then the smile came back again, though in rather a sickly fashion, for she had pulled up, and looked back at him, as if she wished to speak. He hurried toward her, hurried instinctively, though he would have liked to have sauntered.

"I found a dog of yours last night, Mr. Sapley," she said, looking over his head. "It is locked up in the stable; the groom will give it to you if you ask for it."

He reddened, and his small eyes were cast down, and then raised to her face with a slinking kind of inquiry. Had she witnessed the scene between him and Gerald Wayre? But her face was like that of the Sphinx; and as she rode off, Mr. Mordaunt gnawed at his mustache, and swore again.

"Curse her, she speaks to me as if I were a dog myself!" he said. "She hates me; worse than hates me, looks down at me as if I were the dirt under her feet! The gov'nor must have been mad last night when he talked as he did—stark, staring mad. Yet he said he could help me. What did he mean? Oh, he must have been mad! He ought to have seen her treatment of me this morning!" And he walked on, gnawing at his lip, and cutting viciously at the wild flowers beside his path.

At the turn of the road from which another leads down to Regna, she paused for a moment or two to look at the exquisite view. Here the cleft in the rock in which the village lies opens out like a funnel, and a triangular piece of the sea is visible. It glowed like a sapphire this morning, the fishing-boats dancing on an ocean of jewels.

"If I were an artist, like Mr. Wayre, I should like to paint that," said Claire to herself.

As she was about to ride on, a girl came out from a meadow gate-way, and stood with her hands shading her eyes, looking up the road down which Claire had ridden, and up which Mr. Mordaunt had gone. It was Lucy Hawker, and Claire, who knew and liked the girl, called to her softly.

Lucy had not seen Claire, and as she heard her name, she started with a vivid blush, and seemed about to shrink back.

into the meadow again; then she stopped, with her hand pressed against her bosom, and her breath coming fast.

Claire rode up beside her.

"Good-morning, Lucy," she said. "How startled you look! Did I frighten you?"

"Oh, no, miss," said Lucy, dropping a courtesy. "That is—yes; you did startle me a little. I thought it was somebody else."

Claire smiled and looked at her with friendly admiration. In her pretty print frock and cotton sun-bonnet, Lucy made a charming picture of rusticity.

"Whom did you think it was?" she asked.

Lucy fumbled nervously with the strings of her sun-bonnet, and looked as if she were confused. She had thought it was Mr. Mordaunt Sapley, but she could not say so. She was asking herself, in a nervous tremor, whether Miss Sartoris had seen Mordaunt Sapley parting from her a few minutes ago. A sudden idea struck her.

"I thought it might be Mr. Wayre, miss," she said.

The smile still lingered on Claire's face; but a slight color also rose to it.

"Mr. Wayre?" she said; and there was a touch of coldness in her surprise.

"Yes, miss," said Lucy, regaining her composure somewhat, but still blushing under the regard of Claire's violet eyes.

There was something magnetic in those wonderful eyes of Claire's, and Lucy felt as if they were reading her secret; so, as she answered, the blush still came and went. "Mr. Wayre, the gentleman who lodges with us."

"Oh!" said Claire; "I did not know that he was staying at your cottage. And you were looking for him?"

"Yes, miss," replied Lucy, looking down, and working the toe of her neat but serviceable boot into the grass. "I—I wanted to tell him that his lunch was ready. I—I thought he might be—painting somewhere near at hand."

"He is sketching up at the chapel," said Claire, a little coldly. She could not account for the girl's evident confusion. "I hope he is a good lodger?" she added, aimlessly.

"Oh, yes, miss," said Lucy, with enthusiasm. "He's the best we ever had—so kind and thoughtful; and he gives so little trouble, and he's so pleased with everything. Father says it's quite a pleasure to have a gentleman like him at the cottage. There's many that comes—tourists, and such

like—as calls themselves gentlemen, but they're not real gentlemen, like Mr. Wayre."

"I am glad you have so satisfactory a lodger," said Claire. "You've not been up to see me lately, Lucy."

Lucy had been in the habit of coming up to the Court now and again, bringing fish or mushrooms; and Claire had often taken her round the garden, and filled her emptied baskets with flowers.

Lucy looked from right to left, with a little troubled expression in her eyes, then cast them down, and dug at the grass nervously.

"Having a lodger has kept me busy, Miss Claire," she said, with a little catch in her voice.

"I see," said Claire. "Well, you must come up as soon as you can; I have some new flowers to show you."

"Thank you, miss," said Lucy, timidly, and with a suppressed sigh.

"You will find Mr. Wayre up at the chapel," said Claire; and with a nod and a smile she rode on.

Lunch was on the table when she got home, and Mrs. Lexton awaited her.

Claire sat down in her habit.

"I hope you've not been dull, Mary?" she said.

"Oh, no, dear," replied Mrs. Lexton. "It sounds rude, but I have scarcely missed you. I've been wandering about this lovely place, and trying to persuade myself that it is all real. It is like a beautiful picture. I haven't seen half of it yet."

"We will make a tour of inspection after lunch," said Claire.

Mrs. Lexton looked at her admiringly.

"And I have not quite persuaded myself that *you* are real, Claire," she said. "How well you look! Did you have a nice ride?"

"Yes," said Claire, rather absently.

She was asking herself whether she should tell Mrs. Lexton about her meeting with Gerald Wayre; then, ashamed of her hesitation, she said, quickly:

"I have had quite an adventure this morning. I went up to the chapel on the hill and met Mr. Wayre, the gentleman who found my spray last night. He is an architect," she smiled, "and ever so many other things, and he is sketching the chapel."

"Oh," said Mrs. Lexton, with placid interest, "is he a clever young man?"

"Yes, I think so," said Claire, with an indifference which she felt was assumed. "I only saw a part of a sketch which he had made. Shall we go for a drive this afternoon, or would you like to wander about the grounds, Mary?"

Mrs. Lexton said that she would rather see something more of the house.

"I feel that I want to know it as soon as possible," she said.

Claire laughed.

"Your enthusiasm is quite catching, Mary," she said, "although I have been here so many years, there are some parts of the house that I have not been into. A portion was always kept closed during Lord Wharton's life; and since his death," her voice dropped, "I have felt no desire to penetrate into it. The inhabited part is quite huge enough for one person, and I am glad you have come, Mary, to share it with me. Wait till I have changed my habit and we will start while your enthusiasm is still hot."

She exchanged her habit for a dress of plain white merino, whose black sash made it a significant mourning, and they went into the ground and toward the wing which Gerald Wayre had spoken of on the preceding night. Here the walls were closely covered by ivy, which had partly overgrown some of the windows. With its arched door-way and diamond panes, the wing looked very ancient and somewhat weird.

"How exquisite!" exclaimed Mrs. Lexton. "And this part is unoccupied?"

"Yes, and has been for years. I think the rooms have been left undisturbed since the time of Lord Wharton's grandfather. The village folk say that it is haunted, and that figures of the usual vagueness and whiteness are seen to pass the windows. I believe that a murder was once committed in one of the rooms."

"How delightful!" said Mrs. Lexton, with a shudder. "We can get in, I suppose?"

"I have brought some old keys with me," said Claire, "and I am hoping that one will fit. Yes; this is the one. How stiff the lock is!"

The key turned after some pressure, and the door creaked back on its hinges. They entered a small passage with an old worm-eaten stair at the further end. Dust lay thick everywhere, and to Mrs. Lexton's consternation a mouse, as much startled as she was, scampered across the oak floor. They opened the doors leading to the ground-floor rooms, and found themselves in spacious apartments, furnished in old

world style, and with the dust as thick as in the hall. Claire looked round her curiously, and Mrs. Lexton held her breath.

"I can quite understand the village people's belief," she said; "the place feels haunted. What magnificent furniture! Claire, it is a sin to leave it here, neglected and going to ruin."

"Let us go upstairs," said Claire.

They went up to the upper floor. It was as fully furnished as the rooms below. One was a bedroom, with the hangings to the bed in rents, torn by the hand of Time. A satin coverlet lay across a chair, as if it had been thrown there the night previous.

"The murder may have been committed in that bed!" said Mrs. Lexton in an awe-struck voice. "Let us come away!"

They went into the opposite room, and Mrs. Lexton uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, this has been used lately," she said.

It was furnished as a sitting-room, with old oak furniture and dark maroon hangings. There were pictures on the walls, and ashes in the grate, and the dust was not nearly so thick as it was in the other rooms they had visited.

"See, Claire, some one has been writing at this bureau!" said Mrs. Lexton. "Here is the pen and some torn paper!"

"I do not know who could have used it," said Claire.

"Unless it was Lord Wharton; and I do not know why he should come here. That door must lead to the inhabited part of the house. He could come in here through that."

As she indicated the door, Mrs. Lexton started, and gripped Claire's arm.

"What is the matter?" asked Claire.

"There is some one moving behind that door!"

They both stood motionless and listened. Mrs. Lexton went pale. Claire heard a faint noise and the door opened slowly. Mrs. Lexton emitted a faint scream. The door opened wider, and Mr. Sapley appeared.

He started at sight of them, and a curious look passed over his face; then he bowed, and his large mouth twisted into a smile.

"Miss Sartoris!" he said.

Claire had regained her self-possession in a moment.

"You frightened us, Mr. Sapley," she said. "I thought *no one came here?*"

He looked at her sharply with his small eyes.

"*No one does,*" he said; "but I—I was told that a part of

the wing was falling to ruin, and I thought I would look to it. I am disturbing you; I will go, and come another time."

"No, please," said Claire. "I should like to see the part you speak of."

Mrs. Lexton had drawn back behind her. Mr. Sapley's peculiar physiognomy impressed her more unpleasantly even than it had done the night before.

"Certainly," he said, obsequiously. "It must be at the further end. If you will follow me."

They followed him down-stairs, and into the open air. Mrs. Lexton drew a breath of relief, and even Claire was glad to get into the sunlight. Mr. Sapley looked up and down the wing, and poked about with his stick.

"Yes; it is bad," he said. "I think it had better be seen to at once. The whole of this part ought to come down and be rebuilt. It ought to have been done before. It will require some care; I will get an architect from Exeter or from London."

At the word "architect," a thought flashed through Claire's mind.

"I know an architect who will do it," she said.

Mr. Sapley turned his eyes upon her sharply.

"You know an architect?" he said, as if he were off his guard for a moment; then, recovering himself, he smirked: "Who is he, Miss Sartoris? I hope he is a good one; it will need some skill."

Claire looked straight before her with a look of decision which Mr. Sapley had learned to know and hate.

"His name is Gerald Wayre," she said, "and he is staying in the village."

Mr. Sapley started slightly, and his small eyes turned inward, as if he were trying to remember something.

"Certainly!" he said. "Any one you wish, Miss Sartoris."

CHAPTER VII.

GERALD was sitting at breakfast the second morning after his meeting with Claire at the chapel, when Lucy entered with a letter.

"For me?" he said, looking up from his plate in some surprise. For there was no one from whom he expected a letter.

"Yes, sir," said Lucy; "a boy has just brought it from Mr. Sapley's."

She flushed a little, and looked down as she spoke the name.

"Oh!" said Gerald, queerly.

Perhaps it was the summons for trespass.

He opened the letter, and his grim smile changed to one of astonishment. The note was a short one, and intimated that Mr. Sapley would be glad if Mr. Gerald Wayre could meet him at the Court at twelve o'clock that day, to confer with Mr. Sapley respecting some proposed repairs to the building. If that hour would be inconvenient, perhaps Mr. Wayre would name another.

Gerald laid the note on the table, and gazed at it reflectively.

Though the letter had come from Mr. Sapley, the agent, Gerald knew, or, rather, felt, that it had been ordered by the mistress of the Court. How should Mr. Sapley know that he was an architect, or, knowing it, be willing to employ him? Should he go? Prudence whispered: "Send a polite refusal; it will be better for you not to see any more of the Miss Sartoris whose glove you have got hidden in your waistcoat-pocket, just over your heart; indeed, it will be wise of you to pack up your few belongings and depart from Regna for some distant clime—as distant as possible." But at Gerald's age Prudence is not often listened to. The prospect of doing anything to the Court, the thought of the few pounds which remained in his purse, tempted him to acceded to Mr. Sapley's concise but polite request.

"Anyhow, I'll go and see what he wants," he said. "Beggars ought not to be choosers; and if I don't like it I can say no. There will be no harm done."

He found the boy who had brought the note sitting in a ramshackle room, which was attached to the cottage, and formed the inn part of it.

"Tell Mr. Sapley 'all right;' I will be there," he said.

Then he went to his room and put on his best suit, got his box of drawing instruments, and a block of cartridge paper, and went out.

It was much too early to present himself at the Court, and he made a round of it, thinking deeply as he went. He had no idea of what was wanted, or whether he would be man enough for the job; but he had never lacked confidence, and it did not desert him on this occasion.

As he strode along he stopped now and again to look round *him—at the village lying in the clefts of the rocks, at the prosperous farms, at the thick woods and fertile uplands; and reminded himself for about twenty times that they all belonged to this young lady who had sent for him; that she*

was rich, and a power in the land, and that he was a poor devil of an adventurer upon whom she had taken pity. She had been so friendly with him up at the chapel that he had been inclined to forget the difference between them; he must be on his guard against forgetting it for the future.

As the stable clock struck twelve, he went up the terrace steps, and was met by the butler at the hall door.

"Mr. Wayre, sir?" he said, interrogatively; "this way, please." And he led Gerald into the library.

Mr. Sapley was seated at the table, and he rose and looked at Gerald with a keen scrutiny in his small eyes. Now, he had intended to treat this unknown young man with a curt kind of condescension, with the patronizing manner with which Mr. Sapley's kind only barely veil their insolence; but there was something in Gerald's manner and countenance which made Mr. Sapley pause.

Gerald did not look the kind of man to submit to insolence, however veiled; and there was something in the calm, grave regard of the dark eyes, something in the self-possessed bearing of the strong and graceful figure which made Mr. Sapley lower his eyes and shuffle his huge, flat feet uneasily.

"Mr. Wayre, I presume? Will you take a seat?"

"Thank you," said Gerald; and he sat down.

At the sound of his voice, Mr. Sapley started slightly, and glanced at him with a keener scrutiny.

"Miss Sartoris—whom you have met, I believe?" he put the question as if he were assured of an affirmative, "desired me to write to you respecting some repairs that are required in the old part of the Court. You are an architect, Mr. Wayre?"

"Yes," said Gerald.

"I ask you, because I do not find your name in the directory."

"It isn't there," said Gerald. "I am not a member of the Institute; or, indeed, a recognized member of the profession," he added, frankly.

Mr. Sapley looked at him with a mixture of suspicion and satisfaction.

"That is rather awkward, Mr. Wayre," he said. "The work we wished to consult you about it rather—er—a delicate business. It is the restoration of an ancient part of the Court, and requires some technical knowledge and skill. I am afraid Miss Sartoris did not know that you were not a regular professional."

Before Gerald could answer, the door opened, and Mor-

daunt Sapley entered. He stopped short as he saw Gerald, and his face grew red and ugly with malice and resentment.

"This is Mr. Wayre; my son, Mr. Wayre," said old Sapley.

Gerald, as he bowed, regarded Mr. Mordaunt without a sign of recognition, but Mordaunt's face grew redder and more sullen.

"Mr. Wayre tells me that he is not a professional architect," remarked Mr. Sapley.

Mordaunt looked over Gerald's head. "Then that settles the business, I should think," he said, with a covert sneer. "We couldn't think of intrusting important work to an amateur."

"I am scarcely an amateur," said Gerald, addressing the father. "I have done work and been paid for it. That removes me from the category of amateur, does it not?"

"What work?" asked Mr. Sapley.

Gerald mentioned his jails and other buildings.

"Abroad, on the other side of the world!" said Mordaunt, lounging against the window and eying Gerald with an affectation of contempt.

"Have you done nothing in England?" asked Mr. Sapley.

"Nothing," said Gerald, quietly.

Mr. Sapley's face grew clearer, and his manner a little more pompous.

"I am afraid that we could scarcely give you the commission under the circumstances," he said. "We have no evidence of your capacity."

"Very good," said Gerald; and he rose. "I think you're acting quite reasonably, and I don't complain; indeed, I am much obliged to you for having given me the chance. Good-morning, gentlemen."

Mr. Sapley rubbed his chin and glanced at him hesitatingly, but did not speak, and Gerald had nearly reached the door when it opened and Claire stood on the threshold. She looked very tall and statuesque in her white frock, and Gerald, as he drew back slightly, felt his heart give one throb of admiration. She looked from one to the other, then bowed to him. He noticed that she did not give him her hand.

"Good-morning," she said, calmly. "Is the business finished already?" and she looked inquiringly at Mr. Sapley.

"It is, Miss Sartoris," said Gerald, with a faint smile, which, however, did not conceal his disappointment. "Mr. Sapley does not consider that I have experience, reputation, *rough for this work*—whatever it is; and I have no right to

complain of his decision. It was very kind of you—of him”—he corrected himself quickly—“to send for me.”

A faint color rose to Claire's face as she stepped into the room and stood by the table.

“There must be some mistake,” she said; and she looked at Mr. Sapley with the expression of reserve which almost amounted to hauteur. “Have you told Mr. Wayre what is necessary to be done, what is required?”

Mr. Sapley drew his beetle brows over his eyes.

“No,” he said, as curtly as he dared. “Mr. Wayre has not been here five minutes. I asked him a few questions as to his experience—usual questions—and he admitted that he had done nothing of the kind in England, and appeared to agree with me that the work ought to be intrusted to a responsible architect.”

Claire glanced at Gerald, who offered no contradiction of Mr. Sapley's statement.

“But Mr. Wayre has not seen the part of the building that requires alteration, repair?” she said, half interrogatively. “Had you not better see it before you decide?” and she turned to him.

“I shall be very pleased,” replied Gerald.

“Very well, then!” she said, with a woman's impatience and impulsiveness. “It would be better for us to go and see it instead of wasting time talking of preliminaries.”

Mr. Sapley's face darkened for a moment, then put on his obsequious smile.

“A very good suggestion, Miss Sartoris,” he said. “I was just about to make it when you came in; but Mr. Wayre caught me up, so to speak. We will go and see the wing at once. This way, Mr. Wayre.”

Claire passed out of the room, but paused in the hall. “I will go with you,” she said; and she went up the stairs for her hat.

The three men went out, Mr. Mordaunt, at whom Claire had not even glanced, bringing up the rear and eying the back of Gerald's head with sullen hatred. He had “got himself up” in an expensive and beautifully fitting riding-suit, and as he regarded himself and compared his clothes with Gerald's well-worn ones, he was filled with an amazed resentment that Claire should have bestowed all her attention on this stranger and left Mr. Mordaunt Sapley unnoticed. *Who was the fellow? and why was she so friendly toward him? Why didn't she let the beggar take himself off?*

"This is the wing," said Mr. Sapley, acidly, and pointing to it with a claw-like finger.

"It is a very fine specimen of early English," said Gerald.

"Yes," assented Mr. Sapley, insolently. "And ought not to be spoiled by ignorant patching."

"You are right," said Gerald, cheerfully, as he examined the weak places. "I should think a great portion of it—from that window, say—ought to come down and be rebuilt. The old plan might be even improved upon."

Mr. Mordaunt sneered.

"That would require a first-class architect," he said.

Gerald nodded with a pleasant frankness, which was more indicative of his contempt for Mr. Mordaunt's opinion than any words could have been.

"Quite true," he said. "The question is—whether I am architect enough?"

As he spoke, Claire came down the terrace and joined them.

"Well?" she said, addressing no one of them in particular; but Gerald turned to her.

"A greater part of this wing should be rebuilt, Miss Sartoris," he said. "I can not say how much until I have made a minute examination. I will do so, if you wish, and I will make the drawing of the rebuilding I should recommend. If you approve of the plan, and desire to employ me, I shall be glad to do the work. If not—well, there is no harm done, and Mr. Sapley can sent for an architect of repute. There are plenty who would be delighted with such a commission as this."

He spoke pleasantly and frankly, but his tone was quite different to that with which he had talked to her two mornings ago. It was as if he wished to mark the difference between them, to indicate that he was sensible of the fact that she was his employer and he her servant.

Claire kept her eyes fixed on the building. She noticed the alteration in his manner.

"That is a very fair offer, Mr. Sapley?"

"Oh, very fair," he assented, sourly. "You bind yourself to nothing, of course, Miss Sartoris."

"Of course!" said Gerald, emphatically.

"It does not sound quite fair, after all," said Claire, still looking at the building. "If I should not like the plans, Mr. Wayre will have had all his work for nothing."

"I shall be quite content," said Gerald, quickly. "Frankly, *I am hoping you will like the plans; anyway, I shall be delighted to seize the opportunity of studying the old work.*"

Mr. Sapley's brows went up and down.

"Then that is settled?" he said, dryly.

"Yes," said Mordaunt, with his Oxford drawl. "Perhaps Mr. Wayre will have no objection to putting his proposal in writing."

The color rose to Claire's face, and she seemed about to speak quickly, but before she could do so, Gerald said:

"Quite so; that is only right."

"And give us a couple of references," added Mordaunt, staring beyond Gerald.

Gerald looked at him.

"References?" he said, quietly. "I am afraid I can not do that."

"It is usual," said Mordaunt, with a still more pronounced drawl.

"I know no one in England to whom I could refer you as to my respectability," said Gerald, gravely, but with no sign of resentment.

"Surely—" began Mordaunt, with a faint sneer; but Claire turned to Gerald quickly.

"It is quite unnecessary," she said. "We are not afraid that you will—run away with the old wing, Mr. Wayre."

Gerald inclined his head, perhaps to hide the swift look of gratitude which flashed into his dark eyes. The two Sapleys exchanged glances, and then stared at the ground.

"How soon can you commence?" asked Claire, trying to speak in a matter-of-fact way.

"At once. I have nothing to do." Mr. Mordaunt smiled significantly. "And I am eager to begin."

"Very well," she said, as if the matter were settled.

"Please get on with it as quickly as possible; the old building may be dangerous. Good-morning, and thank you." She inclined her head and moved away from them, and the Sapleys stood, rather awkwardly, staring at the building. Then Mr. Sapley cleared his throat.

"I don't know that there is anything else to arrange, Mr. Wayre," he said, with the air of a man who finds it difficult to be civil. "Of course, it's very—er—irregular, but Miss Sartoris"—he shrugged his heavy shoulders—"Miss Sartoris is—"

"Impulsive and confiding," put in Mordaunt. "Well, she is responsible, not we."

Gerald made no retort to this pleasant remark, but pushed his hat from his brow and contemplated the wing with an absorbed air, as if he were already at work at his plans.

"I think you said you knew no one in England, Mr. Wayre?" said Mr. Sapley in a dry, suspicious tone.

"No one," assented Gerald, quite cheerfully. "I have been abroad all my life. The wing seems quite uninhabited."

"It is. Abroad? What part, may I ask?" said Mr. Mordaunt, insolently.

Gerald took out his pocket-book, and jotted down a memorandum before replying, and Mr. Mordaunt's face, while he was being kept waiting, grew red with suppressed rage.

"America," said Gerald, at last.

"Rather a large address," sneered Mordaunt, taking out a cigarette.

"Isn't it?" said Gerald, with a pleasant smile. "Mr. Sapley, shall I find a ladder about the premises? I want to get on to the roof."

"Yes, in the stable-yard, no doubt," said Mr. Sapley, grimly.

"Thanks," said Gerald in the most cheerful way; "then I'll go and look for one."

And he strode off, humming the "Soldiers' Chorus" from "Faust."

Father and son looked at each other.

"What the devil does it mean?" demanded Mordaunt, with suppressed fury. "She must be mad to trust this fellow—a complete stranger, for all she knows, a common thief and swindler—with such work. He ought not to be permitted near the Court! I say he may be a common thief and swindler, for all we know. She must be mad! Why, she seems to—to have taken a fancy to the beast."

Mr. Sapley shook his head.

"That's not likely," he said, as if he were speaking to himself. "She's too proud; it's just a whim. And, between you and me, Mordy, we're to blame for the way things have gone. We were too sharp for him before her. You put your foot in it, asking for references—"

Mordaunt turned upon him with a currish snarl.

"That's right, blame me, of course!" he said. "I tell you it wouldn't have mattered what we had done or said; she had made up her mind to employ him. She had taken a fancy to the fellow."

Mr. Sapley shook his head.

"No," he said, reflectively. "But it doesn't matter—"

"Doesn't matter?" echoed Mordaunt, with a sneer.

"No," said Mr. Sapley, his brows well over his eyes, his under lip projecting with an expression half resolute, half

threatening. "It doesn't matter! Don't you be afraid, Mor-daunt. You keep your eyes open and wait. Wait! I'll give her rope enough—"

His voice died into an incoherent mutter as he turned and walked away, with bent head and scowling brows.

CHAPTER VIII.

GERALD went round the end of the house in search of the stables. He quite understood the Sapleys' antagonism to him: a man you have knocked down doesn't generally love you. But Gerald was not much concerned, and felt that he could hold his own against both father and son, especially if Miss Sartoris stood his friend, as she had done this morning.

How lovely she looked in her plain white frock—and how proud and reserved! He thought of Diana and several other goddesses; then pulled himself up short.

"What you have to do, my friend, is to restore the wing of Court Regna, not moon about the beauty of its mistress!"

On his way to the stables he came upon a tiny cottage. It was quite a surprise to him, for it was almost hidden in a little shrubbery. It stood in a miniature garden all aglow with flowers, and was so pretty an object that Gerald, artist-like, stopped to admire it.

As he did so, a little girl, leading an old woman by the hand, came out. At sight of Gerald they paused on the threshold, the girl bobbed a courtesy, and the old woman, screening her eyes with a trembling hand, peered at Gerald for a moment, then courtesied, and murmured something inaudible.

"I don't know, granny; it's a stranger," said the girl, shyly.

Gerald raised his hat, and seeing that they were making for a rustic seat, drew it forward into the sun for them. The girl thanked him, with downcast eyes, and the old lady watched him intently, and her lips moved again.

"Thank you, my lord," she said in a thin voice.

"You are quite welcome," said Gerald, gently. "But I'm afraid you mistake me for some one else; I am not a lord—worse luck!"

The old woman listened intently, and a smile flickered over her face—an eager, wistful smile, which touched Gerald.

"Your lordship is very kind," she quavered. "I trust *her* ladyship is well; I have not seen her of late."

"Whom does she take me for?" Gerald asked of the little girl.

"I—I don't quite know, sir," she replied, shyly. "She—she is very old, and often doesn't quite know what she says."

Gerald nodded, and raising his hat again, with his pleasant smile, passed on.

One of the pensioners of the Court; an old servant, no doubt, he thought.

He went into the stable-yard, and inquired of one of the men for a ladder. He was grooming a horse, and touched his hat respectfully as he answered:

"There's one at the back of the yard, sir; I'll get it."

"No, no!" said Gerald. "I'll get it. Don't leave your horse; they hate being left in the middle of their toilet."

"So they do, sir, so they do!" said the man, with no abatement of his respect. "It isn't every gentleman that understands that."

"I've had a great deal to do with horses," said Gerald.

"That's a good mare."

The man beamed with pleasure. "It's Miss Sartoris's," he said. "Yes, she's almost human, as you may say, sir. Miss Sartoris pets her, and horses are quick to catch at kindness, ain't they, sir? I'll get the ladder for you almost in a minute."

"No; you go on; I'll manage it," said Gerald. He found the ladder, and, though it was a good weight, got it on his shoulder and set off with it. The man eyed him with approval. "That's a gentleman, anyhow, Bess, for all he ain't above carrying a ladder," he remarked to the mare; and she pricked up her ears and tossed her head in assent.

Gerald carried his ladder round to the front of the wing and mounted to the roof. As he had expected, he found it in a very bad condition. It would all have to come down. He stood with one foot on the parapet, looking at the view, not knowing that Claire and Mrs. Lexton were looking at his tall figure standing out against the background of the blue sky. When he came down again he set to work taking measurements, and then, feeling in the vein, took his pipe, and seating himself on the grass, made a rough, experimental sketch or two. Fortunately for him he was an artist as well as an architect—the two things don't always go together, alas!—and he had caught the spirit of the old building. He sketched rapidly, and with an intense eagerness, now and again jumping up to take a measurement or to get a different view.

In his mind's eye he saw the old wing, not only restored,

but improved. He would throw out square windows in the Elizabethan style, with stained glass in the tops of the latticed panes; there should be a carved stone porch, with a griffin, or some other heraldic animal, at either side, and seats within. He pictured to himself Miss Sartoris resting there, with the sunlight falling on her through the leaves of the ivy, which, of course, should trail over the porch, and—he started, for Claire's voice suddenly woke him from the dream in which he had been so absorbed that he had not heard or seen her and Mrs. Lexton's approach.

He rose and slipped his pipe in his pocket—at the imminent risk of a conflagration.

"Are you here still?" asked Claire. It did not sound very hospitable, but he understood. "Mary, this is Mr. Wayre."

Gerald raised his hat and bowed, and he and Mrs. Lexton looked at each other, and Mrs. Lexton was at once favorably impressed. He looked at his watch.

"Four o'clock!" he said. "I had no idea it was so late! Time passes very quickly when one is at pleasant work."

"And have you had no lunch?" asked Claire, with a little touch of self-reproach.

He laughed. "No; but I can't have needed it, as I didn't think of it. Tobacco is a very good substitute, Miss Sartoris."

"We ought to have thought of it, Mary," said Claire, looking at Mrs. Lexton as if it were her fault. "I will send you out something at once; or would you rather come into the house?"

"Please don't trouble," he said. "To tell you the truth, I don't care to break off just now. I'm in the humor."

"And we interrupted you," said Claire, gravely.

"No, no," he said, quietly. "Not in the very least. Please don't go—that is, if you want to stay. I mean—"

As is always the way, Claire's self-possession increased as his diminished.

"Have you been making some sketches?" she asked.

"Yes; but they are only sketches, not finished drawings, of course."

Claire smiled. "Oh, we won't ask to see them."

"You may see them," he said, extending them to her. She did not take them, but went up beside him and looked at them.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Mrs. Lexton, from the other side. "And how quickly you have done them!"

"They are just impressions," he said—"memoranda, so to speak. I may alter them altogether, later on,"

Claire had not expressed any opinion as yet, and he glanced at her expectantly.

"The new part will be finer than the old," she said, looking from the drawings to the house.

Gerald felt a glow of satisfaction.

"I sha'n't alter it then, much," he said, decisively. "I am glad you are pleased, Miss Sartoris; and I hope that you will like the finished plans."

"May I look at them again?" she said.

"Certainly; I am afraid they are very grimy as well as rough, for I have been climbing about the roof." He glanced at his hands. Claire looked at them also, and noticed that on a finger of the left hand there was a ring. It was an old-fashioned ring, of the signet kind, with an engraved stone.

It had not been on his hand when they were up at the chapel. She only noticed it vaguely, her attention having been attracted by the quaintness of the form of the ring.

She looked at the sketches closely. "This is the outside only," she said; "what will you do with the inside?"

"I haven't seen that yet. It all depends upon the other part of the house; I mean the part that adjoins this wing."

"You can go inside now, if you like," she said; "I have the key."

"I should like to," he said.

They went toward the door. A maid crossed the lawn, and Claire beckoned to her. "Tell Nichols to send the tea out here, please," she said. "For three."

"That is an excellent idea, Claire," said Mrs. Lexton. "It would have been painful if Mr. Wayre had fallen exhausted before our eyes."

Gerald laughed. "I have gone without food for many more hours than these," he said, lightly. "But a cup of tea will be delightful."

He opened the door, and they entered. He was deeply interested, not only in the general aspect of the rooms, but in their plan and architecture.

"Oh! these must be saved, if possible!" he said, enthusiastically. "Nothing one could devise could fitly replace them. The stone-work is magnificent, and the carvings—well, we could put them up again, it's true, but it wouldn't be quite satisfactory. We must save them. That is, I beg your pardon! I am talking as if I were already the accepted architect."

"You are. I have seen the sketches and am satisfied," said Claire.

He inclined his head. "Better wait until the plan is finished; Mr. Sapley may also then be satisfied."

"Mr. Sapley?" Claire began, laconically; then she stopped. "We had better go upstairs. You will not be frightened with Mr. Wayre to protect you, Mary?"

"That isn't fair, Claire! You were just as frightened as I was! We were in the room the other day, when Miss Sartoris was telling me that it was haunted, when we heard a noise behind that door and some one entered. It was only Mr. Sapley, but we were both scared for a moment; and I think he was as much startled as we were."

"It only wants a real well-authenticated ghost to make it perfect," said Gerald. "This room has been occupied lately," he remarked, his quick eye noticing, as they had done, the comparative freshness of the room. "It would make a delightful sitting-room or library. It is not often used, of course?"

"Not at all, that I am aware of," said Claire.

"It would make an admirable room for Mr. Wayre to use while he was at work," remarked Mrs. Lexton.

"Oh, I can work in the open air, thank you," he said.

"It rains here sometimes," said Claire, quietly. "You had better accept Mrs. Lexton's suggestion."

It was not for him to bandy words with his employer. He bowed. "Very good, and thank you very much." He glanced gratefully at Mrs. Lexton. "I may take that old bureau into the light of the window?"

"You may arrange the furniture as you please, of course," said Claire.

With the impulsiveness of his nature, he went to the bureau and half dragged, half carried it to the window. "By the way, there may be some papers in it," he said, as he looked at it.

"They will not be of any consequence, I should think," said Claire. "You can keep them together and lock them up in one of the drawers."

"Very well." He brushed the dust from his hands, then stopped suddenly and looked at them and round him with a kind of grave anxiety.

"What is the matter? Have you hurt your hand?" asked Mrs. Lexton.

"No, no," he said. "I have dropped my ring—somewhere."

"You had it on just now, outside," said Claire.

"I know," he said. "Please don't trouble," for of course

they were looking round for it. "I shall find it somewhere about the rooms. I don't generally wear it, for it is too large for me; I came across it this morning when I was getting my instruments together, and I slipped it on."

"Is it a valuable one?" asked Mrs. Lexton, peering round her.

"No," he said, "but I should be sorry to lose it. I have had it all my life, and carried it safely in strange places and through strange scenes. But I am sure to find it; I beg you won't trouble."

"Oh, we must find it!" said Mrs. Lexton. "It is dreadful to lose a family relic, as I imagine this is."

"I don't know," he said, grimly. "I have always had it. It was given to me by the woman who took charge of me when I was a lad. I don't know that it belonged to any one belonging to me."

Claire had said nothing, but had paced to and fro slowly, her eyes bent on the ground, and even in that moment he noticed how exquisite a picture she made, moving with infinite grace through the antique room. Suddenly she stooped and picked up the ring.

"There it is!" she said, holding it out to him.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" he said, gratefully, as he took it from her and placed it on his finger.

"You should have kept it until a reward was offered, Claire," said Mrs. Lexton, laughingly.

"Had you not better put it into your pocket; you may lose it again?" said Claire, gravely.

He put it into his pocket at once. If she had said, "Had you not better hang it round your neck by a string?" he would have obeyed.

"If we rebuild the interior, we must take care of these panels," he said, indicating the oak that covered the walls. "They could be put up again just as they are, for they are in capital condition; at least, nearly all of them. Some of them are rather shaky." He went round the room tapping the dark, worm-eaten oak. "They did their work thoroughly in those days," he said; "these are as firm as the day they were put up."

As he spoke, he struck one of the panels with the soft side of his closed hand, and, as if in mockery of his assertion, a panel just above his head sprung loose, and hung by a nail on the wall.

Mrs. Lexton laughed.

"You were too flattering, Mr. Wayre," she said. "They

did not build as strongly—" She stopped in mid-sentence. "Why, what is that behind the panel?" she asked, timidly.

Claire and Gerald had already seen it. It was a portrait of a lady.

"That is strange!" he said. "Did you not know it was there, Miss Sartoris?"

"No," said Claire, not taking her eyes from the picture.

It was the portrait of a young woman, the face one of extreme beauty, but of a type unlike that of the family pictures in the hall.

Gerald got a chair, and wiped the dust from the painting.

"One can see it better now," he said; and, unconsciously, his voice grew lower. "It is a very beautiful face. Do you know who it is, Miss Sartoris?"

Claire shook her head. She seemed unable to withdraw her eyes from the picture.

"No. I do not think it is a Wharton. It is not like any of them."

"I wonder why it was hidden in this way?" Mrs. Lexton said in almost an awed voice. "We seem fated to meet with the mysterious in this room, Claire."

"It is not an old painting," said Gerald, who had been examining it, "though it is painted in the Georgian manner. There is something Joshua Reynoldish about it."

He touched the canvas reverently with his forefinger.

"I know nothing of it," said Claire.

"Who used this room?" asked Gerald.

"Lord Wharton, if any one," she replied. "The rooms adjoining this—the modern rooms, I mean—were sometimes used by him."

"Do you think he covered it up?" asked Mrs. Lexton in a low voice.

"The hand that placed that panel over it was not the hand of a professional carpenter," said Gerald, absently, as he stood looking at the portrait.

"You are interested in it, Mr. Wayne?" said Mrs. Lexton. He started slightly.

"Yes, naturally," he said. "It is rather a mysterious find. It is well painted, and it is a pity it has been neglected. There are mold spots—you see? It ought to be carefully cleaned."

"I will send it to London," said Claire.

"It is not necessary to do that, if you will intrust it to me, Miss Sartoris," he said.

"Thank you," she said, simply.

"We may find out something about it, Claire," remarked Mrs. Lexton.

Claire looked down silently, and Gerald understood her feelings in an instant.

"Lord Wharton would like his secret kept—if it was his," she said. "We could replace the picture as we found it—if you wished, Miss Sartoris," he added, as he took the picture from its place, and stood it with its face to the wall.

Claire had moved to the window.

"Yes. Tea is ready," she said. "Let us go down. There is the key, Mr. Wayre."

She handed him the key quite naturally, and Gerald's face flushed at this fresh proof of her calm confidence.

The servants had set the tea on a table under a tree, and it looked particularly inviting to Gerald, who was beginning to discover that he was hungry.

"I must wash my hands," he said. "No, thank you, I won't go into the house; there is a pump in the stable."

Mrs. Lexton looked after him with an approving smile.

"I think you have discovered a treasure, Claire," she said in her kind fashion.

Claire looked into the tea-pot before answering.

"Yes? Mr. Sapley does not think so," she said.

"I dare say not," said Mrs. Lexton. "Mr. Sapley did not find him! How I do dislike the look of that old man, Claire! And how handsome this one is!"

Mrs. Lexton laughed.

"How impassive you are, Claire! You are quite right to be. Of course, he is only a kind of servant, and you are his employer; but I must say that he never for a moment seems to forget it. Nothing could be nicer than his manner."

Gerald, with his nice manner, came back at this moment, and Claire gave him a cup of tea. There was no chair for him, and, after handing round the bread and butter, he sat down on the grass.

"You must be famished, Mr. Wayre," said Mrs. Lexton.

"Not famished, only hungry," he said, laughing. Claire extended a cake.

"You shall have all that and the toast," she said. Gerald leaned on his elbow and looked at the two ladies, and round about him, with his happiness quite plainly portrayed in his countenance.

"*They used to say in the bush that I had the devil's own luck, and I begin to think that I have!*" he thought. "*If any one had told me, three days ago, that I should be sitting*

here drinking tea with the mistress of Court Regna, and engaged as her architect, I should have laughed him to scorn."

He turned over his sketches. "I shall work at these to-night," he said, almost to himself. "Fortunately, there is a good lamp at the inn."

"You are staying at the Hawkers'?" said Claire.

"Yes," he said; "they are comfortable diggings; the captain is a remarkably pleasant old man, and the cooking is an agreeable surprise; while Miss Lucy makes a model waiting-maid, and is attention itself. I have fallen in clover."

Claire glanced at him, then looked straight before her thoughtfully. He had spoken Lucy's name quite naturally, and without the least hesitation. Why had the girl blushed and been so confused when she referred to her lodger?

"There are some very interesting characters amongst the fisher-folk in Regna," Gerald went on. "I fancy an author would find them worth studying. Oh, by the way, speaking of characters, I have just seen an extremely interesting old lady. She came out of a tiny cottage round there. She was in charge of a little girl, and they were sitting in the garden, like two figures out of an Academy picture. A most delightful old lady, with snow-white hair and a shrewd old face."

"You must mean Mrs. Burdon—Nurse Burdon, as she is always called."

"She is an old servant, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Claire. "She was Lord Wharton's nurse."

"She must be very old, Claire," remarked Mrs. Lexton.

"She is old, very, very old. No one knows her age. I am not sure that she knows it herself. She is a wonderful old woman in her way, and was, until lately, in possession of all her faculties."

"You must take me to see her, Claire."

"Yes, I often go and sit with her, and though she does not recognize any one, she always remembers me. Her mind wanders sometimes; she has bad and good days."

"This must be one of her bad days," said Gerald, half absently.

"Why?" asked Claire.

"Oh—" He hesitated a moment, then he went on, with a smile. "She addressed me as 'my lord,' when she saw me, and asked after 'her ladyship.' It is the first time I have been mistaken for a member of the peerage, and I was rather astonished."

Claire smiled.

"That is strange," she said.

"Yes, very strange," he said.

"I meant that she should have conferred a title of nobility upon you. She does not often make mistakes of that kind. I wonder for whom she mistook you."

Gerald shook his head. "I may bear some slight—very slight—resemblance to some nobleman in the locality," he suggested.

Claire thought for a moment.

"There is only Lord Chester," she said, "and he is an old man."

"Should you like to be a peer, Mr. Wayre?" asked Mrs. Lexton in her soft voice.

"I would rather be Gerald Wayre, the architect of the new wing at Court Regna," he said.

The moment the words had left his lips he regretted them, for though Miss Sartoris's face had shown no resentment, he feared she might think the response presumptuous. He changed the subject with some skill, and presently rose.

"I will take the sketches home and get to work, Miss Sartoris. Good-afternoon, and thank you very much."

There was a moment or two of silence after he had gone, then Mrs. Lexton remarked:

"How well he said that."

"What?" asked Claire, absently.

"That he would rather be himself and rebuild the wing, than a lord."

Claire looked straight before her.

"It was rather a foolish speech," she said, quietly.

When Gerald had reached the stables he remembered the ladder. He pulled up with a slight feeling of annoyance. It would not do to leave the ladder stuck up against the house, for, though burglars might be *vara avi* at Regna, the thing was a temptation to the curious as well as to the dishonest. He did not like to go back, and yet he could not allow the ladder to remain there.

"What nonsense!" he said, jeering at himself for his reluctance. "Miss Sartoris will not notice my return any more than she would that of any other workman about the place!"

But he was relieved when he got back to find that the ladies had gone.

He shouldered the ladder and was returning with it, when he saw Claire and Mrs. Lexton standing in the cottage garden beside Mrs. Burdon and the little girl. He intended to walk

past them without any sign, but as he came to the group, the old lady dropped a courtesy and quavered out:

"Good-morning, my lord!"

He could scarcely let the quaint salutation go without any response, and so he smiled and nodded.

Claire laid her hand on the woman's arm which she had drawn within her own. "You do not know that gentleman, nurse?" she said.

The old woman looked up at her with a shrewd, half-secretive expression in the faded dim eyes.

"Yes, yes!" she said in her thin voice. "I know him well enough, and so do you, my lady."

Claire changed color for a moment, then she said, gently, and with a smile: "And now you don't know me! I am Claire Sartoris, your little girl, as you used to call me."

"I know—I know!" crooned Mrs. Burdon, nodding her head and half closing her eyes, as if she were sharing a jest with Claire.

"And that gentleman is Mr. Wayre," said Claire.

"Yes, yes! quite right," said the old woman. "Quite right, my lady. I know his lordship as well as I know you! Why do you plague me so?" she broke off suddenly with the fretful resentment of extreme old age.

The ivory of Claire's face grew rose tinted, and Gerald hastened to her relief.

"It is of no use, Miss Sartoris!" he said. "Mrs. Burdon insists upon my nobility—even with a ladder on my shoulder," and with a laugh he hurried on.

CHAPTER IX.

GERALD went to work at his plans that same evening. The lamp, as he had said, was large; it was also hot, but he did not realize how warm the little room had become until he felt the perspiration starting out on his forehead. Then he rose with a laugh, and, lighting his pipe, strolled out for a stretch and a breath of fresh air.

It was a lovely night, with a delightful breeze from the sea; and he sauntered down the steep, roughly paved path to the jetty. He was quite absorbed in his work, and looked at the beautiful seascape absently enough; but presently he became conscious of the figure of a young girl walking along the beach and close to the cliffs, which rose perpendicularly from the very edge of the sea-line.

As the moon emerged from a bank of cloud he saw that the

girl was Lucy Hawker. He was thinking, absently and casually, that it was rather strange for her to be walking alone at that time of night; but concluding that she was tempted by the beauty of the evening, he was turning away, when he saw another figure come down a path and join her. It was a young man this time, and Gerald fancied he bore some resemblance in form and bearing to Mr. Mordaunt Sapley; but he was too far off for Gerald to identify him, and, while he was looking, the two figures disappeared round a bend of the cliff.

Gerald was just at that moment trying to decide upon a knotty question in connection with the plans, and forgot all about Lucy and her companion directly they passed from his sight. He solved the problem in about half an hour, and, relighting his pipe, started to return to his plans.

There was another road, a mere track, leading direct from the beach, and he decided to take it for a change, and was climbing up the steep path, when Lucy dropped in front of him from the overhanging rock.

"Miss Lucy!" he said.

She started, and uttered a faint cry of surprise and alarm, and stood looking at him for a moment or two with wide-open eyes, then glanced swiftly over her shoulder.

"You—you startled me, sir!" she said.

"I am very sorry," said Gerald. "Where did you spring—or, rather, drop—from? I thought for a moment that it was a goat. Is there a path up there?"

"Yes," she replied, looking at him sideways. "It—is not often used. I was taking a stroll; it is such a fine night."

"So it is," assented Gerald. "Too fine for indoors. I think I saw you down on the beach by the cliff, didn't I?"

She was silent for a moment; then she said, with a forced laugh:

"I dare say, sir; I was down there."

"And not alone?" said Gerald, with a faint smile.

"Oh, yes!" she said; "I was alone—"

"That's strange," said Gerald. "I thought—"

Then he stopped. It was scarcely fair to make any remark upon the girl's movements.

"At least, almost all the time," she said. "One of the fishermen spoke to me; perhaps it was him you saw?"

Gerald accepted the explanation unsuspectingly. After all, it was extremely improbable that Lucy, who seemed always so *truthful and modest*, should volunteer a falsehood. He must *have been mistaken* in thinking the man like Mordaunt Sapley,

"I suppose this is good fishing weather?" he remarked.

She assented, and they talked about fishing as they walked up the path side by side. Presently he said:

"I hope the lamp is full of oil, Miss Lucy? I have a lot of work to do to-night. Perhaps you know that I may be employed at the Court, rebuilding the old wing?"

"I heard you were there, looking at it, sir," she answered. "I am very glad! It is a beautiful old place, the Court, and Miss Claire is a kind young lady."

"You like her?" said Gerald.

"Oh, yes, sir! She has always been good and kind to me! Everybody likes her, though sometimes she seems—seems proud and stand-offish; but she is never so with me—leastways, very seldom." She stifled a sigh at the correction. "I've known her ever since she came here; we were girls together like—though different, of course. I think she is the loveliest young lady I have ever seen," she added, warmly.

Gerald felt as if he should like to shake hands with Miss Lucy on the spot; but he wisely made no response.

"This is a lonely path," he remarked, after a pause. "But I suppose you don't mind being out alone?"

"No; I'm used to it, sir," she said, simply. "Very few people come along here; only the coastguard and a fisherman now and again."

"And here comes one of them," said Gerald, as a man came slowly down upon them.

The path was narrow, and he drew aside to allow the man to pass, and, as he did so, he peered at them curiously, and then touched his sou-wester, and gave them "good-night."

"It's Jenks, the coastguard," said Lucy, when the man had passed on.

But after he had gone a few paces, he stopped, and came back to them.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," he said, civilly, with another touch of his cap, "but could you oblige me with a pipe o' bacca? I've run out, and—"

"Certainly," said Gerald; and he opened his pouch, and emptied the contents into the man's horny hand.

"Oh! I won't take all, sir," he said.

"I've half a pound at home," said Gerald; "you're welcome to this."

"Thank you, sir. Mr. Wayre, bean't it?"

"Right the first time," assented Gerald, pleasantly. "Good-night."

"He is always asking for tobacco," said Lucy, with a smile.

"I can sympathize with him," said Gerald. "It must be lonely work pacing the cliffs all night; and a pipe's company. Well, here we are! Good-night, Miss Lucy."

She had stopped a few yards from the cottage, and looked at it hesitatingly, and she responded to his good-night in a low voice, and melted away from his side like a shadow.

"So Miss Lucy's sweetheart is a fisherman?" he said to himself. "Well, I wish her luck!"

He worked late into the night, and the next morning, after breakfast, went up to the Court. He had brought some necessary tools and materials with him, and thinking that it would be as well to take them to the room Miss Sartoris had so kindly lent him, he unlocked the door and went upstairs.

To his surprise, a maid was hard at work, dusting and cleaning up generally.

"You need not go," he said, as with a courtesy she made as if to retreat. "I only want to put these things on the bureau."

"Yes, sir. You can put them inside, if you like," she said, respectfully. "The drawers are cleared out. Mr. Sapley was here quite early this morning, and did it."

"That was very kind of him," said Gerald. "I shall be glad of the drawers."

"Shall I leave the picture here, sir? It looks rather untidy-like."

She looked at the portrait standing against the wall where Gerald had placed it.

"Yes, please," he said; and he took it up and looked at it for a moment or two.

The sweet face seemed to have something pathetic in it which he had not noticed on the previous day, and he sighed as he placed it against the bureau, intending to take it home and clean it that evening.

"The room looks quite bright and cheerful," he said. "I see you have put up some fresh curtains to the window, Susan."

"Yes, sir; Miss Sartoris said I was to, and to light a fire if you thought it at all damp. My name's Emily, if you please, sir."

"I beg your pardon," said Gerald. "Emily's a prettier name than Susan. It was very kind of Miss Sartoris. Never mind the fire; the sun is coming in through the window, and will dry the room famously."

He went outside, and fell to work; but, engrossing as his work was, he reflected every now and then on Miss Sartoris's

thoughtfulness and kindness. It also struck him that Mr. Sapley had been very prompt in clearing out the bureau. "But he is within his right to distrust a man who can't give references," he thought.

During the morning he caught himself wondering whether Miss Sartoris or Mrs. Lexton would visit that part of the grounds; but the morning passed, and they did not appear. He had brought some sandwiches with him, so that he might have a good reason for refusing an invitation to lunch—he would guard against intruding himself upon Miss Sartoris—and was munching one as he walked up and down with his measuring-rod in his hand, when he heard the roll of a carriage, and saw a landau and a splendid pair of horses driving down the road toward the house. The two ladies were inside, and he raised his hat, but turned away immediately.

"There is Mr. Wayre," said Mrs. Lexton. "How busy he looks! Shall we go and see how he is getting on, Claire?"

"Perhaps we should interrupt him," said Claire.

"Perhaps so; but I don't think he would mind," said Mrs. Lexton.

Claire did not respond, and they went into the house. It seemed, however, that she had not forgotten his presence, for when the tea came in she told the footman to take some out to Mr. Wayre.

Gerald saw him coming across the lawn with a daintily laid silver salver, with a slight feeling of disappointment. Perhaps Miss Sartoris would come out later on?

But the afternoon passed without a visit from her, and he finished for the day and went home, feeling as if something were wanting to complete his satisfaction.

The next morning, while he was at work outside, Mr. Sapley came up. Gerald had expected to find him anything but amiable, but, to his surprise, Mr. Sapley was quite civil, and appeared, indeed, bent upon making himself agreeable.

"I see you are getting on, Mr. Wayre," he remarked, glancing under his brows at the sketches and plans lying on the grass. "I hope you find it interesting. Have you got everything you want?"

Gerald replied in the affirmative, and thanked him.

"You must let me know if you haven't," said Mr. Sapley. "Perhaps you would like an extra table, or something, put up in the room you're using?"

"No, thank you," said Gerald; "I have all I want in the table already there."

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Sapley. "By the way, I cleared out

that old bureau for—it might be useful. There were only some old papers there, nothing of consequence, but I thought you might like the drawers empty.”

Gerald said they would be very useful, and, as a return for Mr. Sapley’s civility, showed him the rough sketch of the plans.

Mr. Sapley’s eyebrows went up, and his loose lips drew together.

“Pretty elaborate,” he said. “There will be a rare lot of work here, and it will cost something!”

“It is rather elaborate,” Gerald admitted. “But—well, I didn’t think the cost was of much consequence,” he added, frankly.

Mr. Sapley shot a glance at him.

“No, no,” he said, rather hastily, “just so. I don’t know that it matters—” He paused and rubbed his chin. “It’s a matter for Miss Sartoris, of course. Fine day, Mr. Wayre,” and with a contortion of his face which was intended for a smile he went off.

Miss Sartoris did not come near the old wing that day. But Gerald saw her walking on the terrace, and he paused once or twice in his work to glance at the graceful figure with a curious wistfulness. Had he offended her? Perhaps she resented the foolish speech he had made just before leaving them? He walked home that evening rather thoughtfully; but flung his moodiness from him as he sat down to his plans. He finished them that night, and as he leaned back in his chair said that they were, at any rate, “not bad.” The next day he packed them carefully and sent them to Miss Sartoris, and immediately fell a prey to the demon Suspense.

Claire was at home when they arrived, and she carried the parcel to her own room to open it. The plans were well-drawn, and Gerald had spent a great deal of pains in finishing that of the front of the wing. It was, in fact, a remarkably pretty bit of water-color; and Claire gazed at it admiringly. “How clever he is!” she caught herself murmuring. There was no question about her liking the plan; it seemed to her just perfect. Mr. Sapley was in the library, and she went straight down-stairs to him. He rose and glanced at the roll in her hands.

“These are Mr. Wayre’s plans,” she said. “Will you look at them, please?”

He laid them out on the table and studied them for some *time in silence*, and, to her surprise, he said, at last:

“Very good; very good indeed!”

"I am glad you approve of them, for I like them very much," said Claire.

"Yes, they are very good," he said; "I don't know that you could have anything better."

"I am quite satisfied with them," said Claire.

"Then I suppose the work had better be got on with, Miss Sartoris?" he said. Claire assented. "Yes," he said, musingly; then he stole a glance at her. "It will cost a large sum of money," he remarked in almost the same tone he had used when speaking to Gerald.

"Yes, I suppose so," said Claire; "but it is better to have the thing well done, is it not?"

"Quite so—quite so," he assented. "I will advertise for tenders at once."

"Can not some one on the estate do it?" asked Claire.

"I would rather employ one of our own people."

He bowed.

"Very good. Whoever undertakes it must satisfy Mr. Wayre of his capacity to carry out the work," he said.

Claire was surprised again.

"Thank you; I had forgotten that. Mr. Wayre will be glad that you approve of the plans," she added.

He lowered his eyes.

"Oh, if they satisfy you, Miss Sartoris," he said. He took up a slip of paper which accompanied the drawings. "I see Mr. Wayre has given us an idea of the cost. I mentioned it to him yesterday." He raised his brows as he handed the paper to her. "It is a large sum!"

Claire looked at the paper. There was only a line or two, and her attention was bestowed upon the firm, clear handwriting rather than on the amount suggested.

"Yes," she said, absently. The writing seemed to her characteristic of Mr. Wayre.

"Yes," said Mr. Sapley, rubbing his chin. "I don't know that we can meet it out of the current account. We shall have to sell some stock."

He spoke in as easy, matter-of-fact way, and arranged the papers before him in a preoccupied manner.

"Yes," said Claire again, assentingly. Her ignorance of business or her resources was complete, and she did not understand his proposal in the least.

"If a small local man does the work, he will want some money to start with," he went on. "If you wish it commenced at once, perhaps you had better have the money ready."

"It would be better, no doubt," said Claire. "Do not let anything create a delay."

"Just so," he said. She had moved to the window with the drawing of the front elevation in her hand, and did not see the look he cast at her, a glance of surprise combined with satisfaction. He seated himself at the table, and watching her, drew from his capacious pocket-book a paper, and rapidly filled in some blank spaces in the writing upon it.

"Will you sign this, if you please, Miss Sartoris?" he said, when he had finished.

Claire bent down at the table, and scarcely glancing at the paper, appended her signature.

"Thank you," he said. He did not take the paper up immediately, but left it lying on the table; but a moment or two afterward he dropped one of the plans on the top of it, completely covering it.

"Shall I write and inform Mr. Wayre his plans are accepted," he asked, "or will you?"

"If you will be kind enough," said Claire, with her hand on the door and her face turned from him.

Mr. Sapley waited until the door had closed on her, then he caught up the hidden paper which she had just signed, and with a grim smile of satisfaction, blotted the signature and carefully replaced the document in his pocket-book as if it had suddenly become exceedingly precious.

As he was returning the book to his pocket the door opened. Mr. Sapley started, and his hand gripped the lapel of his coat and drew it across his chest as if he were afraid that Miss Sartoris was returning to demand the paper from him. But it was Mordaunt who entered, and Mr. Sapley let his hand fall on the table with a sigh of relief.

Mordaunt glanced at the litter of plans, and scowled.

"I suppose that d——d fellow has got his way with those things?" he said. Mr. Sapley nodded.

"Take care, Mordy!" he said, warningly. "Miss Sartoris has only just left the room."

"I know," said Mordaunt, sullenly. "I saw her through the window as I passed. What was she signing just now?"

Mr. Sapley looked up—he had seated himself at the table again—with a sharp glance of inquiry.

"Signing?" he replied. "Oh, yes, yes. A lease, only a lease."

CHAPTER X.

EVERYTHING went smoothly and almost rapidly as an express as with the building; for the moment Gerald was informed that Miss Sartoris desired to avoid delay, he set to work "to clear the line," as he expressed it, and made the slow and sleepy folk of Regna and the neighboring town of Thraxton "sit up" with a vengeance.

He chose a young man, just starting as a builder, for the work, and at the set-off, informed him that he, Gerald, meant to keep a sharp eye on the affair. The young fellow—Lee, by name—saw that he had to do with a master-mind he could rely upon, and assented cheerfully.

So it happened that one morning, Claire, walking to the end of the terrace, heard the sound of a pick and saw the dust arise. She walked round to see the cause, and there were a couple of men picking away at the old masonry, and Gerald down below with his dark eyes fixed upon them watchfully. He was so intent that he did not hear her approach.

"Why, you have begun?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, turning to her with a certain eagerness which he immediately suppressed. "You wanted it down at once, did you not, Miss Sartoris?"

"Yes, oh, yes," she said, looking at the men perched on the roof. "But I didn't think you would commence so soon!"

He laughed the short laugh which she had learned to know so well. "At once, means 'at once,' with me," he said. "I'm afraid it doesn't mean quite the same to the good people down here; they should have spent a few years with me over there;" he jerked his head back in the direction of America. "I'm afraid they will make rather a mess," he went on, "but I have arranged to pull down a bit at a time, and it will be carted away as it falls, so as to make as little confusion as possible. What's the matter, my man?" he broke off to inquire of one of the men who had paused and looked hesitatingly at the stone-work he was picking at. "I'm taking Mr. Lee's place while he is at breakfast," he explained.

The man made some reply, and Gerald, with an "Excuse me," to Claire, went up the ladder, and after a short conference, took the man's pick and successfully dislodged the stone, which fell with a dull thud to the ground. Claire watched him with some little anxiety. It seemed to her that he was in *something* very like danger, as he stood on the ledge of the

coping which was being "wrecked," and when he came down, she could not help saying:

"Isn't it rather dangerous?"

"Oh, no," said Gerald, confidently. "Not if you are at all careful."

"Then I hope you—they—will be careful," she said, correcting the "you" with "they" quickly.

"Oh, they are all right," he said, easily. "They are all picked men; I have taken care of that; and Mr. Lee, the contractor, is a sensible young fellow, who will run no risks. He will be here nearly all the time, and when he isn't, I shall take his place. I think you had better stand back a little, Miss Sartoris, a stone might rebound and reach you."

Claire drew back obediently, and presently went into breakfast. When she came out on the terrace again, he was still there, and, as he did not leave until dinner-time, it was evident that he had neglected his own breakfast.

During the afternoon Mr. Mordaunt Sapley came on the scene. He had received a hint from his father, and greeted Gerald as amiably as he could; and Gerald, who was the last man in the world to bear malice, responded pleasantly.

"My father has gone up to London, Mr. Wayre," said Mordaunt, as he turned to go away. "If there is anything you want I shall be glad to do it for you." He made the offer with downcast eyes; but Gerald disregarded his manner and thanked him cordially enough. Mordaunt went up to the Court and asked to see Claire.

"My father asked me to tell you that he was wired for to London, Miss Sartoris," he said. "There are one or two papers he would be glad if you would look at." He spoke almost humbly, and his manner was so marked an improvement on his ordinary one that Claire was agreeably surprised. "About the Grimleys, Miss Sartoris," he said; "my father thinks they ought to go, but I ventured to plead for them, and he says they may stay—of course, I told him you wished it."

Claire was gratified, and showed her pleasure by a smile—perhaps the first she had bestowed upon Mr. Mordaunt.

"Thank you," she said. "I am very glad to hear that. It was very kind of you to plead for them." Mr. Mordaunt was very nearly guilty of one of his Oxford smiles, and so destroying the good impression he had made, but he checked *himself in time*. "Is there anything I can do for you this *evening*, Miss Sartoris?" he asked, with his new air of defer-

Claire discussed one or two matters relating to the

estate with him, and he took his departure remarkably well pleased with himself.

"The guv'nor's right!" he said. "He's a knowing old fox! Yes, I must bend the knee and play the 'humble retainer' business, if I want to get on with her. I wonder what the guv'nor has got up his sleeve, and whether there is anything in this idea of his? It doesn't sound probable, but I'll give it a trial. The husband of the mistress of Court Regna! It sounds too good to be true; like a fairy-tale. Yes, she's beautiful—though I prefer something in Lucy's style; something soft and gentle. Poor little Lucy!" He smiled condescendingly and stroked his slight mustache. He was up at the Court again the next day, and behaved himself so well that, it being just lunch-time, Claire asked him to remain for the meal. He accepted, and kept so careful a guard upon himself that Mrs. Lexton, to whom he had been especially polite, was quite impressed in his favor.

"The son is a great improvement on the father, Claire," she remarked. "Mr. Mordaunt is—is—almost a gentleman."

"Yes, almost!" assented Claire, absently. It was a pity Mr. Mordaunt Sapley could not hear her!

She ran upstairs as she spoke, and presently came down again with her hat on, and went round to the wing. She had got into the habit of going round there, or watching from the end of the terrace, and often Gerald was unaware that she was looking on, and that she was more frequently looking at him than at the work. Sometimes he took off his coat and lent a hand at the more dangerous portions of the demolition, and once or twice Claire had discovered that she was holding her breath as she watched him standing on the edge of one of the broken walls, with the stones falling from quite under his feet. He was sitting on a heap of *débris*, smoking his pipe, when she came up that afternoon, and he rose with a capital affectation of indifferent but respectful politeness. He had learned to set a guard upon himself—like Mr. Mordaunt.

"How fast you are getting on!" said Claire.

"Yes; thanks to Mr. Lee," said Gerald, indicating the young builder, who touched his cap, and looked pleased as he moved away.

"A capital fellow!" said Gerald. "It was a rare piece of luck getting hold of him. But, then, I am lucky."

"Are you?" asked Claire, with a faint smile.

"Yes," he said. "When things are at their worst, I always drop on my feet, Miss Sartoris." He smiled, and, *for the first time*, Claire noticed that he not only smiled w

his lips, but with his eyes, and that they were very handsome and expressive at such times.

"I think we are rather astonishing the natives," he said, looking at the broken wing. "It takes their breath away. We shall begin rebuilding at the end of next week. I want it all, or nearly all, covered in before the winter is upon us."

Lee came back and spoke to him, and they went amongst the ruins. Claire stood looking up at the men at their work of demolition, and lost sight of Gerald for a moment or two, then she saw him standing near the old wall. He had his back to it, and to her, and was giving some instructions to Lee, who had mounted to the roof. Claire was thinking, half unconsciously, how completely Gerald was master of the situation; that his very attitude, and the quiet ring of his musical voice, were eloquent of self-reliance, and she felt a slight thrill of admiration, the tribute which every woman pays to the strong man who is lord of himself and others.

Then, suddenly, the pleasant little glow was dispelled, for she saw, or fancied that she saw, the wall near which he stood, tremble and shake. Her heart leaped, and then seemed to cease beating for a moment. If the wall were to fall while he was standing there, it would come down upon him and kill him. She tried to call to him, but, to her horror, her tongue seemed to refuse to answer to her will. The terrible dumbness lasted only for a moment, but when she did call, her voice was drowned by the noise of the picks and the falling stones, and did not reach him.

She saw the wall again quiver like a huge living thing—there was no fancy about it this time. And Gerald, still looking up at Lee, with a smile, and all unconscious of the doom that threatened him. She felt as if she could not move, as if she were rooted to the spot for a second that appeared an age to her; then she sprung forward, and had almost grasped his arm, when Gerald—as if he had been watching the wall all the time—quietly stepped back. As he did so, the mass fell with a terrific noise. He smiled, and nodded approvingly, then heard a kind of gasp behind him, and, turning sharply, found Claire at his elbow. One of the stones had rebounded, and fallen close at her feet, and, for the moment, he thought she had been struck.

His fear for her turned him sick and white, and he caught her arm and drew her back. As is the way with Gerald's *kind of man*, his emotion made him stern, and it was in a *tone that sounded like passionate anger* that he demanded:

"Why did you come so close? How could you be so im-

prudent? My God! the wall might have fallen upon you! Come back!"

Claire's face was deathly white, and the terror still lingered in her eyes as she raised them to his. But even when the color had come back she did not show any resentment of his manner and speech. And she did not say: "I came to save you!"

Her eyes fell, and she stood quite silent. Gerald drew a long breath—his hand was still on her arm, and none too gently—and he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Sartoris," he said. "I am afraid I was rough and unmannerly; but you gave me a nasty fright. Let me beg of you never to come so near again—never to pass that mark!" He dug his heel into the lawn. "I must ask you to promise me, please!" he added, with a touch of his former sternness.

Claire tried to smile, but the smile would not come. She felt his hand begin to tremble on her arm; and, perhaps, he was conscious that it was so trembling, for he withdrew it. But he still waited with tightly compressed lips, and a rather pale face, for her promise.

"I—promise," she said. And she said it almost meekly. She, Claire Sartoris, mistress of Court Regna! "It was foolish; I thought—" She stopped, and bit her lip.

"You thought it wasn't coming down just yet?" he said. "Oh, but it is never safe to trust a wall in that condition."

"It doesn't matter what I thought," she said, with a faint smile. "I will not go so near again."

She turned from him as she spoke, and went—slowly—back to the house; but she passed quickly to her own room, and locking the door, "let herself go." The restraint she had put upon herself broke down, and with her hands covering her face, she swayed to and fro like a stately pine buffeted by the wind. She could still see him standing by the threatening wall; and she could still hear his stern voice, feel the hard grip of his hand. The shadow of the terror she had endured mingled with a vague mystical pleasure and delight that bewildered and frightened her by its strangeness.

He had been angry with her—and "bullied" her; but she knew that his anger had proved his regard for her safety, his consternation at her danger, and she felt no resentment.

After awhile the reaction passed, and she sunk into a chair in a kind of stupor, in which she kept asking herself whether she would have sprung toward the wall, as she had done, to save, say—one of the workmen?

Gerald also suffered from a reaction, and when she had disappeared, he stood looking at the building, as if he had lost all interest in it—as if, indeed, he rather hated it; and after a time he walked off. He was scarcely conscious that he had spoken, grasped her, so roughly; he could only remember her terrible danger; and every now and then, as he strode along to the cottage, he took off his hat, and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

When he had got home he felt as if he could not remain indoors, as if the small room were not large enough for his quivering nerves. And presently he went down to the beach. A boat belonging to Captain Hawker was dancing on the water near the shore, and, signing up to the captain, who was in his accustomed seat outside the cottage, for permission, he pulled her in by her chain and went on board. A sail would do him good, blow all the “nonsense” out of his brain, and drive the remembrance of her peril out of his mind.

He was setting the sail when he heard a step on the beach behind him, and, looking round, saw Claire. He raised his hat, paused a moment with the sail in his hand, then stepped ashore.

“I want to apologize for my—” he began; but Claire, with a swift rise of color, interrupted him:

“Do not speak of it,” she said. “You were quite right. It does not matter. Are you going for a sail?”

“Yes,” he said, accepting her refusal to hear more.

“It is a lovely evening,” she said.

It seemed to him that she looked at the boat wistfully. Was it possible that—? On the spur of the moment, almost without thinking, he said:

“Would you care to come, Miss Sartoris?”

Claire looked beyond him.

“Are you going far?” she asked, quietly; though her conscience whispered that she was wrong.

“As far as you like—I mean, I only intended running over to the island and back.”

He nodded to a small island called the Eaglet, which lay like a bird on the sea.

“I should like to come,” said Claire, after a brief second or two.

“One moment,” he said in a matter-of-fact way.

He hoisted the sail, shipped the rudder, and spread his coat over the seat.

“Now, if you will go round to the jetty, I will bring the cat, so that you can step in without wetting your feet.”

He handed her in, and she sat in the stern, putting his coat aside.

"Better sit on that, please," he said; "the seat may be wet."

"It is quite dry," she said.

"You can steer? But, I beg your pardon, of course—"

Claire smiled.

"Oh, yes. There is a nice breeze."

He looked up at the sail and nodded, as the boat skimmed along, and then looked at Claire, asking himself if she were really there, or whether he was dreaming. How had he summoned up the audacity to ask her?

Claire looked the picture of calm serenity—it is a way women have when they are doing anything wrong—and her calmness served to restore his self-possession.

"This boat is like an old friend," she said. "I used to go out in it with Captain Hawker when I was quite a girl."

"I thought you managed her as if you understood her," he remarked. "She is a good boat."

"One needs a good boat on this coast," said Claire.

He looked round.

"It looks calm enough."

Claire smiled.

"It is one of the most treacherous places in England," she said. "A storm gets up here as quickly as the storm raised by Prospero's wand."

"Yes?" he said. "I have not seen one since I have been here. You know the Eaglet?" he went on, for the sake of saying something. He was still trying to grasp the fact that she was really sitting there, within a few feet of him.

"Oh, yes! It is a delightful little place, all combs and caves, and crowded by sea-birds. We used to come nesting here—Captain Hawker, his daughter Lucy, and I—and I remember how I used to fancy that I should like to live there, in Robinson Crusoe fashion, away from everybody."

She spoke absently, almost dreamily, and he leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand, his eyes fixed on her face.

"That sounds nicer than it is in reality," he said. "I have tried it, and, like friend Robinson, I think solitude on an island is only agreeable when there is some one to share it. I was shipwrecked on one of the Pacific islands when I was a lad, and it was the most unromantic and uncomfortable time I ever spent."

She, too, leaned forward a little, her eyes fixed upon him with an interested expression.

"Were you there long?"

"Not very. Four days."

He began to tell her about it, and she was so absorbed that she neglected her steering, and was suddenly recalled to it by a sudden puff of wind and the jibing of the sail.

"Oh! I beg your pardon," she said, almost meekly. "That was my fault."

"Not at all," he said, mendaciously, and in rather a pre-occupied fashion, for, as he looked up, he saw an ugly cloud coming up from the west.

Claire followed the direction of his eyes.

"There is going to be a storm," she said, easily.

He bit his mustache.

"I'm afraid there is," he said. "I hope it won't rain."

"It will not matter so far as I am concerned," she said, glancing at her serge dress.

He shook his head gravely.

A moment or two afterward the rain he dreaded began; the cloud grew thicker and darkened the sky, and the wind began to rise in a threatening way.

He leaned forward, and taking up his jacket, put it round her.

"No!" she said, very quietly. "Please put it on! My dress is nearly, if not quite, waterproof."

He saw that she wished it; and he slipped the coat on. The wind grew fiercer and the rain heavier, and, calling himself a careless idiot for not studying the weather before asking her to accompany him, he looked uncertainly from the island to the mainland.

"I don't know what to do," he said, at last.

"Go on," she said, quietly. "It would be rather risky to turn now while the storm lasts."

He looked down. Was she fated to run a double risk in one day through his carelessness? Claire leaned back, grasping the tiller firmly, and keeping the boat in a straight line for the island. She was apparently quite regardless of the rain.

"You are getting fearfully wet!" he said. "And to think that I might have put my mackintosh in the boat."

"It is of no consequence," she said, easily.

The wind had brought a warm tint to her face. Her eyes were glowing.

"It is like the old days," she said, presently. "It is so long since I have been on the sea in a storm."

"It might have been kind enough to keep fine," he said.

"Here is the island. Hadn't we better run her into the creek, and go ashore? There would be some shelter in one of these caves there."

"Very well," she said.

As she ran the boat into the little haven, the heavens seemed to open, the thunder broke with a deafening roar, and a flash of lightning rent the darkness, which was almost as that of night.

Gerald jumped with the anchor, and, standing up to his middle in water, drew the boat ashore.

"Now, quick!" he said.

She stood poised for a moment on the gunwale, like a bird read for flight—the resemblance struck Gerald even at that moment—then he gave him her hand, and almost lifted her to the beach.

"Run to that cave!" he said.

He forced the anchor down with his foot and followed her. The cave was but a small opening in the rocks, and there was barely room for them both to stand in it, and Gerald remained outside.

"Oh, come in!" she said, almost impatiently, a clap of thunder partly drowning her voice.

He went in, and they stood side by side. They were sheltered from the rain, but not from the wind, which seemed blowing from all points of the compass.

"It is taking longer than I thought," she said, venturing to peep out.

It proved an incautious movement, and the wind, taking advantage of it, swept her hat from her head.

"That is gone forever," she said. "No, please let it go; you could not get it!" for Gerald had made a movement as if to pursue it. "There! it is in the sea!"

As she spoke she put up her hand to her head, for the hat had taken some mysterious pins and fastenings with it, and her hair was coming down.

Her color rose, and she laughed. She seemed at this moment just a wild school-girl, excited by the wind and the storm; quite a different person to Miss Sartoris, of Court Regna.

Gerald looked at her. The storm was thrilling through him—and something other than the storm. She stood so close to him that the sleeve of her dress brushed against his arm; the exquisite face was within a few inches of his own.

As she stood with one hand holding her jacket close, the other up to her head, she spoke a few words now and again.

but he was silent, and presently she grew silent also, as if the storm and the darkness were beginning to affect her.

"It is very weird," she said, at last.

And he fancied that there was something constrained in her voice, as if she were growing nervous.

"It will be over directly," he said, encouragingly. "Are you getting cold? If you would only let me put my coat round you! It is of no earthly use to me!"

"No, no!" she said in a low voice. "I wish it would not lighten so! It makes the darkness immediately afterward so—"

Her voice broke suddenly, for something had rushed from just above their heads into the open air, with a wild, unearthly shriek. She uttered a sharp cry, and completely unnerved and unconscious of what she was doing, turned swiftly to him, and putting her hands on his shoulders, hid her face on his breast.

His arm went round her, in a movement as unconscious as her own; he felt her hair, released from her hand, sweep like silk across his lips; and his face grew white under its tan as he set his teeth hard. He could feel her trembling, quivering with nervous terror as her hands clung to him, and the desire in his heart to bend his head and kiss her, to whisper, "I love you!" was almost irresistible. But he set his teeth still harder, his face grew stern, and his voice sounded almost harsh as he said, with labored breath:

"Don't be alarmed; it is only a sea-gull."

His voice seemed to recall her scattered senses. With a little shudder and a gasp, she looked—not up at him, but over her shoulder. Her hands dropped to her side, and she drew away from him, gathering her hair together. Then she looked at him—as if scarcely realizing his presence—as if she were quite unconscious that she had, only a moment ago, clung to him for protection.

"It—startled me!" she said, panting. "Why, you look scared too." She laughed.

It was evident that under the stress of the moment she was, in very truth, unconscious of having flown to him.

"Yes," he said, trying to speak lightly, but feeling as if every word were wrung from him. "It—is—all right; see, it is clearing now."

He put his hand to his lips uncertainly, for it seemed to him *as if her hair was still upon them with its unconscious but maddening caress.*

CHAPTER XI.

THE storm began to clear away almost as rapidly as it had gathered. Gerald stole a glance at Claire's face; it was quite free from embarrassment, and though without a trace of color, quite unabashed, though her brows were rather straight. It was evident that she did not know in the very least degree that she had flung herself upon his heart, and yet there was a vague sense of something having happened during that moment or two when the heavens were rent by the lightning. And Gerald was relieved, indeed glad, that it should be so. *He* was aquiver with the sense of his close contact with her, and his heart, against which hers had beat so wildly—like an imprisoned bird beating affrightedly against its cage—throbbed tumultuously. At that moment he knew that he loved her fully and passionately, so passionately that his lips trembled still for the caress of her hair, so truly that he almost resolved to go away from Court Regna for a time, until he had fought down his hopeless love and subdued it.

For it was so hopeless! Here was he, an adventurer, as he had called himself, well-nigh penniless, in love with the mistress of Court Regna! It was worse than absurd. He called his pride to his aid as he stood there—his arm touching hers—and bitterly laughed himself to scorn for a presumptuous idiot.

The sooner he got his work done and cleared out of Court Regna the better for his happiness and peace of mind.

"It seems to have cleared," he said, at last, and speaking in quite a matter-of-fact tone.

They went down to the boat, and as it was rocking a great deal, he got in, and holding it fast, put out his disengaged hand for her. "Rest your arm on my shoulder, Miss Sartoris," he said. "A false step would be awkward for you."

Claire laughed softly. "I have had to clamber on board in worse seas than this," she said, and, just touching his hand, she sprung, lightly as a feather, into her place. He shipped the anchor and put the boat round, and she was soon skimming homeward.

"I am afraid you will be late for dinner," he said, "and I know you must be very wet."

"It doesn't matter in the least," she replied. "I told *Mrs. Lexton* that I was going for a long walk—I intended going to one of the farms, but I strayed toward the beach."

instead—and she will think that I have been waiting for the storm—as I have been; and we shall be dry before we get home. I am afraid I have given you a great deal of trouble.”

“Not at all!” he said, promptly, and with a politeness which was grimly and absurdly incongruous with the state of his feelings. “I am sorry it didn’t keep fine.”

There was a silence for some minutes as he busied himself with the sail, and Claire watched him dreamily. The vague sense that, in some way, they had become close friends, haunted her; and, combined with this, was the consciousness that she was strangely happy and content notwithstanding that she was wet and late for dinner, and ought to be anxious and concerned at keeping Mary Lexton waiting. She would have been astonished and not a little affronted if any one had told her that her happiness and contentment sprung from the fact of Gerald’s presence, for Claire, unlike most girls of her age, knew little of love. She had lived so lonely a life with the old lord, had met so few men, and was so ignorant of the art of flirtation and the cultivation of sentiment, that it never occurred to her that she was—to put it mildly—taking a very deep interest in Mr. Gerald Wayre, and that she found it pleasant to look at him and listen to him; that she admired—with a warm admiration—his self-reliance and strength of body and character. She did not guess that his lips had kissed her hair, that he was at that moment throbbing with a strong man’s passion.

Gerald found it difficult to keep up an exchange of commonplace, and he began to hum half unconsciously. Claire listened dreamily for a time, then she said:

“What is it that you are singing?”

He started slightly. “Was I singing? I beg your pardon, I didn’t know. Let me see, what was it? Oh, yes; an Indian song.”

“It sounded rather pretty,” said Claire; “sing it louder; do you mind?”

“Certainly,” said Gerald. “I’m afraid I can’t translate the words, and they will sound awful gibberish.”

Raising his voice only just sufficiently for it to reach her, he sung the song. It was a plaintive Sioux chant, and the Indian words were quaintly musical. He had a capital voice, a clear and firm tenor, and Claire listened with delighted surprise. There seemed nothing this young man could not do! *A faint smile curved her lips, as she leaned forward with her chin resting on her hand, her violet eyes resting on his face, and sideways to hear as he watched the sail.*

"That is beautiful!" she said, as the last notes died away. "It sounds quite pathetic. What does it mean?"

"Oh, it is the song of the hunter, and it is addressed to his sweetheart. I have heard the young braves sing it outside the wigwams just before they were starting for a big hunt. It is a kind of serenade, and the hunter promises, if the big horse—meaning the buffalo—spares him, to return with plenty of furs and skins to lay at the feet of his beloved. The meter of the song is that of Longfellow's 'Hiawatha.' Artemus Ward says, 'Injins is pisen;' and so they are generally, but there is just a little romance about them now and again."

"I should like to have an English translation," said Claire.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be much use my trying," he said, regretfully. "I haven't the literary instinct, I'm sorry to say."

"Will you sing something else?" she said, after a pause. "It is delightful on the water."

He was too wise to sing a sentimental ditty in English, and he chose a Canadian boating-song, and sung it quietly as before.

"You have a good voice, Mr. Wayre," said Claire, absently. "I am sorry Mrs. Lexton is not here; she is so fond of music, and would be delighted with those two songs. Perhaps you will be so kind as to come up to the Court some evening and sing for her?"

"She is sorry Mrs. Lexton is not here!" thought Gerald, miserably. "But of course she is! Why shouldn't she be? I am a fool not to know that I am nothing but 'Mr. Wayre, my architect,' to her!" "I shall be very pleased, Miss Sartoris," he said, aloud. "Why, what is that?" he added. They were nearing the pier, and he saw, on the road far above it, a carriage standing.

"It looks like the Court carriage," said Claire, carelessly. "Yes, it is."

"We are nearly home now," he said, with a half-unconscious sigh.

"Yes," she assented. "I have enjoyed the sail very much, and I am very much obliged to you."

"Don't mention it," he said, with a ghastly attempt at a smile.

As she steered the boat alongside the landing, Mr. Mordaunt Sapley came down the steps. It was evident that he had been waiting for them.

"I saw that you had been caught in the storm, Miss Sar-

toris," he said, "and I ventured to send up to the Court for the carriage."

"Oh, thank you," said Claire, pleasantly. She felt happy enough that evening to be pleasant—even to Mr. Mordaunt. "It was very kind of you."

"I knew you must be wet, and I thought you would like to get home quickly. There are some wraps in the carriage."

"Oh, but I am not cold, thank you," said Claire.

"It is—er—rather risky sailing, this weather," he said, as he offered his hand to help her out, and he glanced with a sullen resentment at Gerald, who was letting down the sail, and had *not* offered her his.

"But it was quite fine when we started," said Claire; "and it has been a very pleasant sail." And she looked with a smile at Gerald; but his face was turned away from her, and was set impassively. It almost looked as if he were glad to resign her to Mr. Mordaunt.

"At any rate, it would have been better if you had had some waterproofs with you," said Mordaunt. "You run the risk of a severe cold, Miss Sartoris."

Claire laughed softly.

"You forget that I am used to our own Downshire climate, Mr. Mordaunt," she said. "And we were under shelter during the storm."

Still Gerald did not speak, and, with a slight compression of her lips, she said:

"Good-evening, Mr. Wayre, and thank you," and turned away. Mr. Mordaunt conducted her up to the carriage, and would have enveloped her in wraps, but Claire smilingly refused them, and he stood bareheaded until the carriage drove away. Then he went down again to the landing, and, after watching Gerald roll up the sail, said:

"I'm afraid Miss Sartoris is very wet."

Gerald was not in the humor at that moment for much of Mr. Mordaunt Sapley, and he answered, rather shortly:

"I'm afraid so."

"Wouldn't it have been as well if you—er—had taken a proper boatman and some mackintoshes, Mr. Wayre?" said Mordaunt in a condescending fashion, which nettled Gerald almost beyond endurance.

"Should you call me an *improper* boatman?" he said, with a *dangerous* smile. "My good sir, I am quite competent to *manage* a boat. But you are right about the mackintoshes," he said. "I was an idiot to forget them."

"It would not have mattered if you had been alone," continued Mr. Mordaunt. "But Miss Sartoris is a lady—"

"So I always thought," said Gerald, with a cheerfulness which was even more dangerous and misleading than his smile. "As you are standing there you may as well catch hold of that rope and make it fast. Thanks. Fine evening now, isn't it? By George! it's later than I thought."

"Yes, rather too late for a lady to be on the water in this weather," said Mordaunt.

"And I shall get a scolding from Miss Lucy for spoiling a meal," continued Gerald. At this innocent remark Mr. Mordaunt paused on the brink of another exasperating sentence, and, with sudden accession of color and a suspicious glance from under his brows at Gerald, started up the steps.

Gerald slept little that night, and when he fell into a restless doze, he dreamed that he was standing in the cave with Miss Sartoris's hands on his shoulders, and her heart beating against his, and that Mr. Mordaunt Sapley—of all persons in the world—was attempting to drag them apart, and that at last he succeeded.

In the morning he found that his coat was still wet, but he did not send it down to be dried; instead, he hung it near the window, and, having done so, stood for a moment looking at it, and thinking that a few hours since it had been round the woman he must teach himself *not* to love.

When he went down to the Court, he felt that he should like to send in and ask if Miss Sartoris had caught cold, but he resisted the desire. All the same, he found himself looking out for her all through the morning, and felt a dull ache of disappointment because she did not come. It was a busy morning, and Lee came to consult him frequently.

"We'd better begin pulling down the rest, Mr. Wayre," he said; "but there's the furniture still in your rooms."

"That's all right," said Gerald, rousing himself. "I'll get it moved into the adjoining rooms directly. In fact," he added, glad of something active to do, "I'll move it myself."

He went up to the room—the others on the ground-floor had been cleared—and set to work. Miss Sartoris had given him permission to convey the furniture into the room of the new house adjoining the old, and he began to carry in the chairs and smaller articles first. When he came to the bureau he found that it was in two parts, and in lifting the top, two or three old papers fell to the ground. They had either dropped from the drawer, at the end of which they had caught, and

been overlooked by Mr. Sapley, or from a secret depository. One looked like a receipt, the others were papers folded lengthways; all of them had evidently been in the bureau some time.

He scarcely glanced at them, and thrust them into his pocket, intending to give them to Mr. Sapley or Miss Sartoris, whichever he chanced to see first; and he was carrying in the hangings, when the door opened and Claire entered.

The blood flew to Gerald's face for a moment, then left it as pale as his tan would permit. She did not change color, but a smile—to him it seemed a heavenly smile—dawned on her face.

"Oh, why did you not have some of the servants to do this?" she said.

"It wasn't necessary," he said. "It has taken very little time. I hope you have not caught cold from yesterday's wetting, Miss Sartoris?"

"Oh, no, no," she said, and she smiled again. It seemed to him that there was a new note in her voice, one still more musical than of old; but he thought that it was a fancy on his part, born of his newly discovered love. "I am not in the least the worse. And have you carried all those things in yourself? Let me help you," and she went to some of the hangings he had thrown on a chair.

"No, please don't," he said, quickly. "They are smothered with dust and—" he glanced at the beautiful morning frock. She hesitated, then her hands fell to her side, and she stood watching him. "There is no chance of a storm to-day," she said, presently. "Mrs. Lexton and I are going to drive to a flower show at Thraxton. At least," she added, more gravely, "she will see the show, but I shall remain in the carriage, of course." Lord Wharton's death was too recent to permit of her appearing in public. She looked round the room. "Is it all clear now?"

"Yes. Oh, by the way, I found some papers, Miss Sartoris; they tumbled out of the old bureau." He took them from his pocket and held them out to her. "Mr. Sapley must have overlooked them when he cleared out the things."

She did not take the papers, but glanced at them indifferently.

"I suppose they belong to him," she said. "I will give them to him; or, perhaps," she added, with a little laugh, "you will not mind taking charge of them. If I take them, I shall be sure to put them somewhere and forget them."

"Certainly," he said, as he replaced them in his pocket. "Most ladies do that."

She smiled, and moved toward the door, but lingered, looking out of the window; then, as if she had suddenly remembered, she said: "Oh, Mr. Wayre, I told Mrs. Lexton of your singing, and she—I—will be so glad if you will come and dine with us this evening. Will you?"

The invitation was given in the frankest and simplest way, and Gerald, with a leap of the heart, and forgetting all his resolutions, was about to accept as simply, when he remembered something else, and quietly said:

"Thank you very much, Miss Sartoris, but I am afraid I shall not be able to come."

The faintest smile of disappointment, not unmixed with surprise, crossed her face. "You will be—busy?" she said, a little coldly.

"No," he said, frankly, and with a second's hesitation. "The fact is, Miss Sartoris, I don't possess an evening suit."

Claire's face cleared, and she laughed softly.

"I don't think Mrs. Lexton will mind, and I am sure I shall not," she said, with a little touch of pleasant contempt in her voice. "If that is your only reason for declining, pray come. I am afraid you will find it dull—"

"No, I shall not find it dull," he said, almost abruptly; the prospect opened to him like a glimpse of Paradise. "I shall be glad to come."

"Eight o'clock, then," she said. "And you will bring some music?"

He laughed and shook his head. "What little I possess I carry in my head," he said.

"What a funny place to keep it," she said, with a touch of girlish playfulness which thrilled him. It seemed to him as if he should never know her, or exhaust the "infinite variety" of her charm. She went, leaving the room, to his fancy, echoing with the sweetness of her laugh, radiant with the reflection of her loveliness.

He went about for the remainder of the day like a man in a dream. The evening shone before his mental vision with rays of gold. To spend two, say, three, hours with her! Lee and the men noticed the rapt look on his face, and one man said to another:

"He's a rare fine-looking gentleman, Mr. Wayre, bean't he?"

When he came home he took out all his clothes, and put them under a severe inspection, and after the most profound

and anxious consideration chose a dark serge suit as being the nearest approach to evening dress. Then he folded up the others and put them back into the portmanteau, and with them the coat he had worn that day.

And he, of course, quite forgot the papers which were still in the pocket of the coat.

CHAPTER XII.

THE Thraxton flower-show was a great event, second only in importance to the annual visit of the great traveling circus, and everybody who could by any means attend it, made a point of doing so. It was held in Lord Chester's grounds, and his lordship and the rest of the aristocracy put in an appearance and wandered in and out the tents and about the grounds with that fixed smile which always indicates intense boredom. There was a band—the Thraxton Volunteers—but it discoursed anything but sweet music, and was just a little too loud, even for the open air. However, Thraxton was very proud of it, and it was still more proud of itself, and so general satisfaction reigned around. Although the Court Regna gardener did not compete, his exhibit was always far better than any of the others—even that of Lord Chester's—who, though a peer, was not nearly as rich as Miss Sartoris, and of much less importance than the mistress of the Court.

Early in the afternoon Claire and Mrs. Lexton drove up to the entrance, and Mrs. Lexton alighted. She had not wanted to come, seeing that Claire could not go into the show, but Claire had insisted, remarking that it was the only piece of dissipation that she would be able to offer her friend.

"I shall only just walk through, Claire," she said.

"You will do nothing of the kind," responded Claire. "You are to look at every flower—I know how fond you are of them—and not to hurry in the very least. I shall be quite happy watching the people."

And she spoke the truth. She felt strangely happy that afternoon; and, wisely, did not attempt to seek the cause; though every now and then she remembered that Mr. Wayre was coming to dinner, and thought how pleasant it would be to hear him sing again.

The landau, with its superb bays, and servants in mourning livery, went slowly up and down the road, and Claire leaned back and watched the people making their way in little batches toward the entrance, with its flags and streamers fluttering gayly in the slight breeze. She knew, and was known

to all of them, and she bowed and smiled in response to their respectful greetings. All Thraxton and Regna seemed to have taken a holiday that day, and Claire found herself laughing softly in harmony with a group of merry girls who went by, dropping a courtesy as they passed the grand carriage.

The landau turned after a little while, and as it reached the gate, Lord Chester came out and raised his hat. He was a tall, thin man, of about sixty, with close-cropped white hair, and a military bearing. He had been the colonel of a crack cavalry regiment, and was a distinguished-looking man, and he was a bachelor, strange to say. Claire had met him now and again at flower-shows and similar functions, and Lord Chester had a great admiration and sympathy for the beautiful girl whom Lord Wharton had kept shut up for so many years.

He had not only raised his hat, but ventured to offer his thin, white hand.

"I am so glad to see you out, Miss Sartoris," he said in his clear, high-bred voice, and with the smile which many women had found so fascinating. "Are you not coming in? Ah, I am afraid not! Yes, yes! I am sorry."

"Is it a good show this year?" asked Claire.

He gave a little shrug of his square shoulders.

"About the same as usual, I think. Of course, the Court exhibit takes the lead, also as usual! Fortunately, it is not wet. I don't know why; but it generally is, as you know to your cost. I hope it does some good. I suppose it does." He smiled, showing his white, even teeth. "I have often asked myself which exerts the most blighting influence on the temper—a flower-show or a local concert, and I have never been able to decide. I *think* the former, but then I am, for my sins, one of the judges, and suffer accordingly. This year I was going to propose that we should give a prize to everything; it would prevent so much jealousy and heart-burning; but the committee didn't see their way to it. Committees of all kinds are so stupid."

Claire laughed, and as he looked at her, he was almost guilty of murmuring audibly: "She is more lovely than ever!" "I hear you are making great alterations at the Court?" he said, aloud.

"Yes," said Claire, and half unconsciously the color mounted to her face.

He sighed, but smiled.

"How lucky you are to be able to do it. The Hall is nearly tumbling about my ears, but I can't afford more than

"a new slate or two now and then." He was rather given to jesting at his poverty. "Some of these days you will hear that the roof has fallen in, and will have to send some of your people to dig me out of the ruins."

"I will come myself," said Claire, smiling down at him.

"Then, the sooner it falls in, the better!" he retorted, gallantly. "By the way, I hear wonderful accounts of your architect. Quite a clever young fellow, a sort of genius, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is very clever, I think," said Claire. The color had gone again, and her face was of its ordinary whiteness.

"Strange for a man of these parts. We don't generally breed geniuses."

"Mr. Wayre does not belong here," she said.

"No? I thought I knew the name." He wrinkled his brow as if he were trying to remember. "I seem to have heard it before, somewhere. Then you discovered him? That was very clever of *you*!" The horses began to fidget. "But I am keeping you. May I call some day—soon, Miss Sartoris?"

Claire murmured her permission, and the carriage moved away.

Lord Chester stroked his iron-gray mustache thoughtfully as he made his way back to the tent.

"Yes, she is the most beautiful girl I ever saw; and she is charming, especially when she looks straight at one with those violet eyes, and smiles," he said to himself. Then he sighed. "I wish I were twenty years younger!" he added, wistfully.

As the carriage reached the end of the road and was about to turn back again, Mr. Mordaunt Sapley came along in the direction of the show. He was very nicely dressed in a suit exactly appropriate to the occasion, and wore a specimen begonia in the button-hole of his light-gray frock-coat. He flushed a little as he raised his hat to Claire, and flushed still more when she returned the greeting with a smile. He could scarcely know that the smile was merely mechanical, and that she barely noticed him.

He entered the tent, and mixed with the crowd, nodding condescendingly to the commoner people, and smirking with an affectation of familiarity with those of the county families, who vouchsafed him a nod or a couple of fingers. Presently he left the tent, and as he did so he saw a slim, girlish figure standing near a shrubbery. It was Lucy Hawker. Mr. Mordaunt frowned, and bit his lip, and, after a cautious glance round him, strolled in her direction, and followed her *into the shrubbery*. She walked very slowly, so that he could

overtake her, and turned to him with a smile on her pretty, soft face, which many of the Regna young men would have gone through fire and water to obtain, but which roused Mr. Sapley's resentment.

"So here you are," he said, trying to speak pleasantly.

"Yes," she said in a low voice, her eyes fixed on him with loving pride. "I thought I should see you, Mordaunt. I have been keeping about here out of the way, thinking you would come in search of me. I hope you haven't been looking for me long, and waiting?"

"Oh, no," he said, biting his mustache. "The fact is, I don't think it is very wise of us to be seen together. People are so quick to notice, and quicker to talk."

She looked at him swiftly and timidly.

"They have seen us together before now," she said. "Surely there could be no harm in your speaking to me, Mordaunt, seeing that we have known each other ever since we were children."

"Ah, yes, children," he said, still keeping a sharp lookout. "But we aren't children any longer."

"Sometimes I wish we were," she murmured, sadly.

"Eh, what? You've got into a bad habit of muttering to yourself, Lucy. I should break myself of it, if I were you."

She glanced at him again, and her lips quivered.

"I am as I have always been, Mordaunt," she said, softly.

"You did not find fault—"

"Oh, well, don't let us quarrel for the few minutes we are together!" he said, pettishly; "and they'll have to be precious few minutes, for some of the people are coming out of the tent, and will be walking down here. And though you don't seem to mind, I do. I have to think of you, you see," he added, with noble disinterestedness.

"Forgive me, Mordaunt, dear," she whispered.

"There's nothing to forgive. You are just a little careless, that's all, Lucy," he said. "By George! here are some coming now—good-bye."

"Good-bye," she murmured, hastily.

She looked wistfully up into his face, and then at the begonia in his coat.

"What a beautiful flower, Mordaunt!"

"Yes, isn't it?" he said. "Take a prize, if I'd shown it—but we swells can't go in for the prizes."

Her face fell; perhaps she had thought that he would give it to her.

"You will come down to the old place to-night, Mordaunt?"

"Yes, yes," he assented, hastily. "You walk on now, or they'll see us. Good-bye;" and he turned and walked away from her with a scowl of sullen impatience on his face, which changed to a smirk as he met the group approaching him.

A quarter of an hour afterward, as the Court carriage was standing a little way from the entrance, Lucy saw him going up to it, and, naturally enough, she drew up behind the bank of laurels near which she stood and watched him—for to poor Lucy there was no sight on earth so precious as that of this elegant "Oxford gentleman" who had won her heart.

Claire, who had been studying the catalogue, looked up as he approached.

He raised his hat with the respectful air which he had assumed of late, and said:

"Quite a large attendance to-day, Miss Sartoris. I am told that it breaks the record."

"I am very glad," said Claire. "I shall hear a full account of it from my friend, Mrs. Lexton."

"I am sorry you can not go in," he said, and he smiled rather nervously. "There are some very good flowers." As he spoke, he looked down at the begonia which he now held in his hand. "Yes. This—er—is rather fine, isn't it?"

Claire glanced at the flower and assented.

"Perhaps you will—er—accept it, Miss Sartoris?" he said. "It will be a kindness—to the flower; I shall be sure to lose it before I get home. Please do!"

Claire attached no significance to the offer. She rarely went into the village without some of the women or children presenting her with a flower or a shell; and she was averse to wounding any one's feelings—even Mr. Mordaunt Sapley's.

"Oh, thanks," she said, and she took the flower. "It is a very fine one indeed. Are you going back to the tent? If so, will you please tell Mrs. Lexton on no account to hurry. I am quite happy."

With his eyes on the flower in her hand, he murmured an assent, and prudently took himself off.

Lucy had seen the whole of the little incident quite distinctly; and as she hurried away a shadow of disappointment—too slight to be that of suspicion—crossed her face, and she sighed deeply. He had given Miss Sartoris the flower he had refused to her—Lucy—who had given him everything!

It touched her to the heart, but her jealousy would not have awakened if she had not met Mordaunt Sapley a few

minutes afterward. He was walking along, with his head more erect than usual, and a smile of satisfaction on his weakly vicious face, and he started as she came upon him from a side walk.

"Halloo, Lucy! not gone yet?" he said, with a certain embarrassment, which she was quick to divine.

"No," she said; "but I'm going now."

"So am I. Quite tired of it. Beastly bore, this kind of thing."

"You looked happy enough just now, Mordaunt," she said. "What have you done with your flower?"

He glanced at her sideways, and then at his button-hole, with an assumption of surprise.

"My flower? Ah, yes; it's gone—I must have dropped it. Wish I'd given it to you to take care of."

Her face flushed as she shrunk with a woman's horror of a falsehood on the lips of her lover.

"Yes, it is a pity," he said, lightly. "Never mind, I'll bring you one from the garden to-night."

She did not thank him, and hung her head, with a strange look in her face, which would have surprised him if he had not been too wrapped up in his self-satisfaction to notice it; and they parted at the end of the walk with only a faint "Good-bye" on either side.

That evening Claire, for the first time in her life, was in doubt as to what she should wear for dinner. But her hesitation did not last. With woman's true instinct, she felt that if she did not wear an evening dress, as usual, Gerald Wayre would think that she attached importance to his lack of a dress-suit; and she chose a handsome frock of soft black silk, and still softer lace, and wore a diamond bracelet and pendant, as well as the spray he had recovered for her. Perhaps, too, she was half conscious of the desire to appear at her best in his eyes; and, again, for the first time in her life, she felt a subtle kind of satisfaction in her attire as she went down-stairs to the drawing-room.

Gerald was announced a few minutes after she had gone down; and, as she glanced at him, she thought that the plain serge suit gave him as distinguished an appearance as the regulation attire could have done. As for him, as he took her hand, he had hard work to keep his admiration from declaring itself through his eyes. But though her beauty made his heart throb, it filled him with a despairing sadness. The costly gems served to remind him of the hopelessness of his

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passion. He stifled a sigh, then, with a great effort, regained his usual alert brightness.

The butler announced dinner almost immediately. It was a most enjoyable meal. Mrs. Lexton was full of the flower-show, and Claire led her on to give a graphic account of it. Gerald, as he ate his dinner and listened to the two women, glanced now and again round the magnificent room. Strange to say, he did not feel out of place; rather, it seemed to him as if he had been used to all this stately refinement. He did not feel at all uncomfortable in his serge suit, and the butler, who was a severe critic of men and manners, noticed the absence of any embarrassment on Gerald's part, and remarked sententiously in the servants' hall, that Mr. Wayre "was a perfect gentleman."

Gerald listened at first, but presently he began to talk, and Claire, to say nothing of Mrs. Lexton, found herself completely entertained. Gerald had seen a large slice of the world, and could tell of what he had seen with that graceful simplicity which is beyond art. As he told them of scenes and incidents in his checkered career, Claire found herself listening with an almost breathless interest, and it was not until the butler, placing the famous Court Regna port upon the table, had coughed twice, that Claire said:

"Mr. Wayre, you will like to smoke. I'm afraid I can't offer you a cigar, or even a cigarette. Lord Wharton did not smoke."

Gerald said he had a cigarette. "But I am not supposed to stay long," he said, as he opened the door for them.

"No, don't, please, Mr. Wayre," said Mrs. Lexton, who seemed to lose her nervousness and timidity in his society.

"How delightful he is!" she said to Claire, as they sunk into the luxurious drawing-room chairs. "I feel as if I could never tire of listening to him. What I like so much in him is the absence of self-consciousness. So many young men just talk for effect. Now, Mr. Wayre told you the most extraordinary adventures—and one feels that they are true—and yet so simply, and without bringing his own share in them into prominence."

"Yes," said Claire, quietly. There was a faint color in her face, and her eyes were shining brightly, as if in rivalry with her diamonds.

Mrs. Lexton laughed rather disappointedly.

"I don't think you admire him quite as much as I do, dear," she said.

Claire appeared engrossed in turning over the music, and

made no response; and she was still thus employed when Gerald came in.

He remembered that he was asked to sing, as well as dine, and glanced at the piano.

"Is it too soon after dinner, Mr. Wayre?" said Mrs. Lexton. "I hope not."

Gerald smiled. How often had he sung in the mining camp the very moment the hasty meal had been devoured!

"I'm afraid you will be disappointed if you expect great things, Mrs. Lexton," he said. "I've just got the knack of the street singer, that's all." He went to the piano, where Claire still stood.

"Will you see if there is anything you know here?" she said.

He turned over the pile of music and shook his head.

"I'm afraid not."

"What shall we do?" asked Claire, with a smile.

"I'll try and play something," he said, modestly.

"Oh!" said Claire. "I did not know—"

"Oh, I only vamp," he said; and he struck a rough-and-ready accompaniment, then began to sing. He did his best—naturally enough, poor fellow—and the clear tenor notes rose and floated through the room. Mrs. Lexton glanced at Claire with a gesture of delighted surprise.

But Claire, standing beside the piano, made no sign, only when he had finished she said, very, very quietly:

"Will you sing again?"

"Will not you?" he asked.

"Presently," she replied, almost coldly, for she was fighting, with "sweet maiden ferocity," against the effect of his nearness, the deep musical voice which seemed to wake a subtle echo in her heart.

He sung again, and still stronger grew the spell upon her. She stood very near him, listening to every note, her eyes downcast, her heart beating fast, so that the lace on her bosom rose and fell almost in unison with the liquid notes.

"Now, will you sing something?" he asked, and he looked up at her with grave entreaty. She turned over the music absently.

"Here is a duet, 'Love's Quest,'" he said. "I think I know that. Will you sing it with me, Miss Sartoris?"

The "Miss Sartoris" came afterward, as if he were reminding *himself* of the fact that he was "Mr. Wayre, the architect," and it recalled her to herself.

"Yes," she said in a low voice, and they sung. She stood

close at his elbow; he could feel her breath upon his hair, feel the soft, fleecy lace—soft and fleecy as it was—against his shoulder, and he sung like a man in a dream, scarcely knowing that he sung. And yet the words were so significant:

“He knew, where’er he went,
In hopeless dreams his love was spent;
For him no joy, for him no rest;
He toiled in vain on true love’s quest!”

When he came to the last line, his voice faltered, then ceased. He still played the accompaniment, but glanced up at her.

From the clear pallor of her face the violet eyes shone like stars, and he met their gaze. The music died away; he was back in the cave again, with her hair across his lips, her hands upon his shoulders.

He glanced across the room, where Mrs. Lexton had been sitting, but she had moved into the conservatory, not out of hearing, but out of sight.

“Miss Sartoris!” he said, scarcely conscious that he was speaking. “Claire!”

She did not move, her eyes still dwelt upon him, and—Was he mad, or did they shine with a sudden tenderness? The divine madness of love was upon him; he forgot the social gulf that divided them, forgot that he was a penniless adventurer, and she the mistress of Court Regna. He took the small white hand near him, and grasped it firmly, and love’s avowal was on his lips.

“Claire!” he said.

As he spoke, alas! Mrs. Lexton came back into the room.

“How well your voices harmonize!” she said. “Can you not find another duet?”

Gerald glanced at her vaguely.

“Miss Sartoris—Claire—I must speak to you to-morrow!” he said, almost hoarsely. “Do not be angry. Wait—try and forgive me—until to-morrow!”

Alas, and alas! To-morrow is a fatal day! If he had only spoken that night! Claire drew her hand away without a word, but her star-like eyes lingered upon his face, and their violet drew deeper.

He got up—the room seemed to be swimming round—and said a hasty good-night to Mrs. Lexton, who looked at him with pardonable surprise at his abruptness, and left the room.

He caught up his hat from the hall table, and strode down the path through the lawns.

He had been mad, mad; and yet— The tenderness, the

inexpressible glow that lay in those violet eyes, still shone on him, and set his heart throbbing and leaping. Was there then any hope for him?

He had reached the turn of the path, when a girlish figure came quickly, yet hesitatingly, upon him, with a cry of "Mordaunt!"

He did not hear the word, but saw that the figure was that of Lucy Hawker. In the electric condition of his mind, her sudden presence confused him.

"Miss Lucy!" he said.

Then, as he uttered a faint exclamation, and drew back, as if startled and disappointed, he said:

"We seem fated to meet by moonlight!"

She drew the thin shawl, which most of the Regna girls wore, about her face.

"It's you, Mr. Wayre?" she said, with a gasp of relief.

"I, my very self," he assented, scarcely knowing what he said. Then he added, for he saw that she was trembling, and that her face was haggard and drawn, as if with trouble:

"What is the matter?"

And as he spoke, the Fates and his tenderness for all weak things prompted him to lay his hand upon her shoulder, with the strong man's ready offer of sympathy and consolation.

The words, the touch, were too much for Lucy, and she bowed her head upon his arm in sudden collapse, and burst into tears.

And as they stood thus, Claire stepped out on the terrace, her heart beating fast, like a wild animal, in her bosom; and as she looked across the lawn these two figures, the man with his hand upon the girl's shoulder, the girl with her head upon his arm, stood out with startling distinctness.

She looked, and her heart seemed to cease beating, a mist rose before her eyes, a terrible cold, like that of ice, ran through her veins, which a moment ago had thrilled so warmly.

She uttered no cry, did not move, but her face grew whiter and still whiter, and her lips set like those of a marble statue.

CHAPTER XIII.

LUCY sobbed hysterically for a moment or two, and Gerald, who knew enough about women to be aware that it was no use speaking to her until the little fit was over, waited patiently. His new-born love for Claire filled his heart with tenderness.

toward all her sex, and he felt very sorry for Lucy. Though he did not know what was the matter, he guessed that it was something connected with a love affair, and wondered how any young fellow could have had the heart to bring tears to the soft, child-like eyes.

If he had even known that Claire was watching him from the terrace, he would have felt no uneasiness. All his heart was given to Claire, his whole being absorbed in her, and it would never have occurred to him that she would ever dream of being jealous of Lucy Hawker.

Which shows that no man has ever yet understood a woman.

When Lucy's tears had subsided, she drew a little away from him, shamefacedly.

"Is anything the matter, Miss Lucy?" he asked.

"No—no, sir!" she said, with a little catch in her voice. She had had time to find an excuse for her hysterical outburst. "I was walking alone in the wood and I thought I heard some one behind me, then I saw you and ran up to you. I was a bit frightened; I hope you'll forgive me, Mr. Wayre?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Miss Lucy," he said. "I am very glad I chanced to be here. Didn't you call me by some name, though? I fancied—"

"No, sir," she said, hurriedly, averting her eyes.

"Ah, I thought you did," he said. "I was afraid you were in some trouble; this is a world of trouble, Miss Lucy; we all get our share."

"Yes, indeed, sir," she said, with a sigh.

"Just so. Now, if you are in any trouble and I can help you, I needn't say that I shall be very glad to do so. I don't want to force your confidence—"

"Oh, no—no, sir," she said. "You are always so very good and kind."

"In fact," he continued, "there is some one who has a right to know of any trouble you are in; and that's your father. I have seen a very great deal of the world, Miss Lucy, and I've come to the conclusion that when anything is wrong with a girl—or, for the matter of that, a man—she or he can't do better than go to the father. I haven't one myself," he added, gravely. "I have never had one that I remember—I wish I had!—but I'm quite sure that I'm right.

If there's anything wrong, anything that worries you, no matter what it is, go to your father. I haven't any right to exact a promise, but, if I had, I would ask you to take my advice."

Gerald's influence over most women was a powerful one.

With such a girl as Lucy Hawker it was irresistible. She drew a long breath as if she were forming a resolution.

"You are very good to me, Mr. Wayre," she said. "I am in a—kind of trouble, and I *will* go to my father."

"That's right!" said Gerald, cheerfully, little guessing that he had touched the spring of a lever which would work him much woe. "You tell your father everything. Take my word for it, you haven't a better friend on earth."

"I know—I know!" she murmured. They walked together to the cottage. It was late, but there were one or two persons on the narrow road, and standing at their doors, and these gave them good-night as they passed.

When Gerald reached his room he lighted a pipe and paced up and down, recalling every incident of his evening at the Court, and trying to realize what had happened. He had called Miss Sartoris "Claire," had, with the language of the eyes, told her that he loved her. To-morrow he must go and tell her so plainly, by word of mouth. How would she receive his avowal? had he only fancied the tender look in her eyes, or was it really there? It seemed like madness to hope, and yet his heart beat wildly with hope. He knew that she was noble-minded; it was just possible that she would consent to forget the difference between them, would sink her pride of wealth and station, and consent to be his wife.

All night he dreamed of her; in the morning he rose, had his bath, and after breakfast went down to the Court as usual. Lee met him at the half-demolished wing.

"You haven't begun to pull down the other part yet?" said Gerald.

"No, sir," said Lee. "I thought I would clear away some of the stuff first; there will be less mess."

"Quite right," said Gerald. He looked round the works, and then went across the terrace to the hall door and inquired for Miss Sartoris.

"Miss Sartoris is not in, sir," said the footman. "She started directly after breakfast for a ride to one of the distant farms, and she won't be back till the afternoon."

Gerald went away surprised and disappointed. His heart sunk. What did it mean? She must have known that he would come early in the morning; had she gone away to avoid him? Yes; that must be it. He was a fool to hope!

He returned to the building, and after watching the men for a little while, went up to the old room. He had cleared everything out of it excepting the portrait of the unknown lady. He took this up and looked at it mechanically, his

thoughts with Claire. The face seemed to smile at him more pathetically than ever that morning, as if it sympathized with his hopes and uncertainties. In a vague way it seemed familiar to him. He dusted it carefully with his handkerchief, and, deciding to take it home for cleaning that night, looked round for some place of safety for it. It occurred to him that it would be safer in its old place behind the panel than anywhere else, at any rate, until they demolished the room, and he replaced it there and fastened the panel over it; then he went about his work in a perfunctory way until the sun began to sink.

By that time he judged that Claire would have returned, and he went slowly up to the house. The footman said Miss Sartoris was in and would see him, and conducted him to the library. He waited there about five minutes, and then the door opened and Claire entered.

She was in her riding-habit, and as he looked at her, he thought of the morning at the chapel, of the sketch he had made of her, and which he looked at every night before he went to sleep.

She did not offer him her hand, but stood holding her whip, with her eyes downcast. There was no trace of embarrassment on her face, which was perfectly calm and almost impassive. To him it seemed that it looked almost like that of a Grecian statue, exquisite in its immobility.

His heart sunk. If there had been a trace of bashful confusion in the lovely face, he would have been encouraged; but he had come to tell her of his love, and he would tell her, let the result be what it might.

"You have been for a long ride?" he said.

"Yes," she assented; and her voice was as impassive as her face, though his conventional words thrilled through her.

"I came up this morning in the hope of seeing you," he said. "I have something to say to you which I almost fear to put into words. To me they seem so wild, so preposterous, that I scarcely dare hope that you will accept them seriously."

She did not speak or raise her eyes, but both hands closed more tightly on the whip.

"Miss Sartoris, I have told you just what I am; what the world calls an adventurer. I came here in the course of my wanderings, and Chance—Fate, I think—drew me to meet you. Fate might have decreed that after exchanging a few words with you, I should go on my way, but it willed otherwise. Since that night I saw you there in the woods we have met almost daily. From the very first hour of our meeting,

you have exerted an influence over me against which I fought at first, but against which I can fight no longer."

Still she did not speak, but her breath seemed to come faster for a moment or two.

"I have felt that strange influence all along. As I have said, I have struggled against it. I have told myself twenty times a day that you are as far above me as the stars, that you are mistress of all this," he waved his hand slightly. "Rich, of an exalted station, and that I am—what you know. I set a guard upon myself and thought that I had learned my lesson too thoroughly to forget the difference between us; but last night my heart broke its bonds and declared itself. I must have shown you that I loved you."

She raised her eyes to his face for a second only; there was no encouragement in them, but almost an expression of indignation, but Gerald was looking down and did not see the fleeting glance.

"When a man loves a woman as I love you, and has shown her by a look and a whispered word, that he loves her, he owes it to her and to himself that he should speak out, let the result be what it may. If I could have kept my secret, I would have done so. I ask you to believe that."

His voice was almost stern, and her hands, that held the whip so tightly, trembled a little.

"I know what the world would say if you were to accept my love. It would say that I had no right to lay it at your feet, that you were foolish to stoop and accept it. But, notwithstanding this knowledge, I have come to tell you, Miss Sartoris, that I love you."

A tremor passed over her face, and the violet eyes were hidden by the long lashes.

"I love you with all my heart and soul. I have never loved any woman until I saw you."

She glanced at him swiftly, and her lips parted; but she set them again firmly.

"You are just all the world to me, and if you send me away, you send me to a life of wretchedness and misery. But I do not ask for your pity; I ask for your love."

His voice vibrated with passionate earnestness, and there was a ring of manly dignity in it which almost unnerved Claire. But the vision of his meeting with Lucy rose before her eyes, and she steeled herself. Her face at that moment was like that of a cameo in its set whiteness.

"If you will give me your love it will be to me as the breath of Heaven. I can say no more; I would not have said

this but—for last night! Miss Sartoris—Claire—will you forget your wealth and station and give yourself to me? Last night I thought—perhaps it was madness—that you looked at me as if I might dare to hope. I have cherished that look ever since! Tell me if I was indeed only mad, or if I may venture to hope?”

There was silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the marble mantel-piece. “Will you not speak?” he said, almost breathlessly. “Answer me, ‘Yes,’ or ‘No.’ Be it what it may, I will accept it at once and without question. I know that if I am so fortunate as to possess your love, you will say so. The difference in position between us will not count with you. I know that, for I have learned to know *you*. Speak to me, Claire! Your silence is terrible! I repeat, I love you! I love you! I know that if I can win your love I can make you happy! All my life shall be devoted to you! I—” He stopped suddenly, and his strong hand gripped the end of the table vise-like. Her silence weighed on him, tortured him.

“Speak to me!” he said. “Do not be afraid. If it should be ‘No,’ I shall not whine or resent it. I have no right to do so. Who am I that I should dare to hope for so priceless a thing as your love! Whatever it may be, tell me my fate! See, I only ask for ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Which is it, Claire?”

She raised her head and looked at him. It seemed to him, in his terrible moment of excitement, that there was something almost accusatory in the gaze of her eyes, now deeply violet. It might have been a look of accusation or of indignant pride.

He waited, his heart beating fast; then the words came.

“It is ‘No,’” she said.

He stood for an instant, as if scarcely realizing the import of the curt sentence. His head sunk as he bit his lips, as if with an effort to control himself.

“No?” he said.

“No,” echoed Claire, almost inaudibly. As she spoke, the bent whip snapped, and she let the fragments drop from her hand.

“I understand,” he said. “I was mad, then, after all! My love must have deceived me! What can I say to you, Claire—Miss Sartoris?”

To this question there was no reply. The silence seemed to weigh upon them both, the ticking of the clock became a torture. The room seemed to swim round with Gerald; her

"No" rang like a knell within his heart. Outside the sun shone brightly, the sky was dyed a glowing red, but to him it seemed as if a darkness had suddenly fallen upon the room, through which shone the face of the woman he loved, like a star.

He stood with downcast eyes in silence for a moment, calling upon all his manliness to support him.

"It is 'No'?" he said. "You do not love me?"

She made no answer, but turned away from him, so that he could not see the anguish in her eyes and on her quivering lips.

He drew a long breath. "Well, I had no right to expect any other answer! It was sheer madness on my part, and I ought to ask your forgiveness. I do so."

She made no response, and after looking at her he turned away and looked out of the window, as if he could not bear to glance upon the face which meant so much to him. The silence lasted for nearly a minute; then he said, huskily, as if he were trying to control his voice:

"You will find it hard to forgive me, no doubt, Miss Sartoris. My presumption must seem a heinous sin in your eyes. You will not care to see me—meet me again? I would leave here at once, to-night—but there is the building." He thought for a moment, his face heavy with care. "It is not necessary that we should meet. I need not come near the house, and you can avoid the new building when I am there. All our business can be done through Mr. Sapley. When the work is completed, I will leave Regna immediately—that very hour, if it be possible. I shall pass out of your life very soon, and there will be nothing to remind you of the—annoyance I have caused you!"

She did not speak as she moved almost imperceptibly toward the door.

"One moment, before you go," he said. "I want to say—to tell you, that you are quite free from blame in this matter. It was sheer madness on my part—a madness in which you had no part. I suppose that last night my love for you deluded me into imagining—all sorts of wild, improbable things."

Her hand went up to her bosom, and caught at the edge of her habit, but she did not speak.

"I only am to blame!" he said. "I was just the moth that loved a star, and thought that because it shone, that it *shone alone for me*. By no word or look have you encouraged me in my madness. Do not let it weigh upon you. I am *worth a thought*. A nameless adventurer has crossed

path, and if he has dared to love you—why, that is only natural. He will go as he came, and there will be an end of him.”

He forced a smile at these brave words. Claire half turned, and her lips parted as if she were about to speak, but he held up his hand.

“For God’s sake, don’t say any conventional words of pity!” he said. “I know that I am not worthy of your love, but that does not make the loss of it any easier to bear. Let me go without a word, Miss Sartoris, either of pity or of censure. The man who is sentenced to death is not consoled by the speech of the judge.”

Claire closed her lips and moved toward the door. He went and opened it for her, and as she passed out, he touched the sleeve of her habit with his lips. She did not feel the caress, did not meet the anguish in his eyes, and the door closed between them.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLAIRE went straight to her room. What it had cost her to say that “No,” no man can describe, and only a woman can understand. All the while he had been talking, pleading, her heart had gone out to him. Once or twice her hands had almost dropped the whip, had been stretched out toward him; it was only by recalling his meeting with Lucy, by keeping it before her eyes, that she could find strength to resist him.

Some women, loving as she loved, would not have allowed what she had seen to come between them. They would have regarded it as just a man’s flirtation with a village girl, would probably have taxed him with it, and have accepted his excuses and forgiven him. But Claire was not made like most women. Her very ignorance of the world, and of the ways of the men that dwell therein, prevented her viewing such a flirtation as a matter of no moment. The fact that he could go straight from her presence with a look of love in his eyes, the word of love warm on his lips, and caress Lucy Hawker, filled her with horror.

And yet his words had borne the accent of truth; he had been so manly in his declaration of love for her! Claire felt bewildered, as if she had been plunged suddenly into a strange world, in which men spoke with the eloquence of truth while *lie was in their hearts*. She suffered cruelly, for she loved *a deeply and passionately*. What joy it would have been *to tell him of that love, to tell him that she counted*

her wealth and position as mere dross weighed against the worth of his love!

She wondered what he would do now! Perhaps she had driven him into the arms of Lucy Hawker. At the thought, a spasm of jealousy ran through her, and she hid her face in her hands. Should she go away? However carefully she might avoid him she might see him, and the sight of him would cost her such acute anguish. But, no, she would not go away, she was too proud to let him suspect, by her flight, that she loved him; indeed, she would endeavor so to bear herself that he should think that she had forgotten what had passed between them, or, at any rate, deemed it of no importance.

Gerald went out of the house feeling half dazed. Though he had scarcely dared to hope that she would accept him, her refusal had completely crushed him. As he recalled her manner of the previous evening, he still felt convinced that there had been something in her eyes which had encouraged him. If that was so, what had happened since then? Perhaps she had had time to consider her position, to remember the difference between them, and her pride had awakened. After all, it was just what he might have expected. What right had he to hope that the mistress of Court Regna would stoop to love a nameless adventurer?

Well, he deserved his fate. What he had to do now was to keep out of the way while he was compelled to remain at Regna, and to get out of it as soon as possible. He must try and forget her, though it seemed to him that he should never forget her, never cease to love her while life lasted! As he reached the building, Lee came up and spoke to him. Gerald could scarcely bring himself to comprehend what the man was saying, and Lee stopped and looked at him curiously and gravely.

"You are not looking quite the thing this evening, sir," he said.

"I've got a headache," said Gerald.

"You look quite knocked up, sir," said Lee. "I'd go home and take a rest, sir, if I were you. There's no need for you to be at the works for some days. I'd take a holiday, sir."

"A holiday?" said Gerald, vaguely.

"Yes, sir," said Lee. "I've got it all clear before me, and the plans are so straightforward that I could get out the foundation and so on without troubling you for quite awhile. *You'd be all the better for a little change, sir.*"

The man's suggestion was a very welcome one to Gerald.

It seemed to him that if he could get away for a little time he could bear the blow better. Every moment he was near the place he would be dreading meeting her.

"I rather think I will take your advice, Lee," he said. "I am feeling rather knocked up, and a change will put me straight."

He went over the works with Lee, and saw that everything was right to the minutest detail, then he went homeward. The spring had gone out of his step; he walked with his head bent—a very different man to the Gerald Wayre of a few hours ago.

He went down to the pier, and lighting a pipe, stared vacantly at the sea. Like Claire, he felt bewildered. Why had she said "No" so coldly? It was unlike her. She had been kindness and gentleness itself up to this morning. It was strange that she had not said one word of regret for his foolish passion. "She might have let me down easier!" he said to himself. "It was not like her!" He could not but remember her many acts of kindness; how she had clung to him in the cave; had always treated him as an equal and a friend. Why, she had gone out of her way to ask him to spend an evening at the Court. Had she been aware of his love all the time, and simply been amusing herself? He put the thought away from him at once. No, he knew her too well to deem her guilty of that. Her treatment of him was inexplicable. But it didn't matter; he had got his answer, and must put up with it. After all, many a better man than he had loved in vain. Was he to make moan? He would bear it like a man, and try and forget her. He would go away somewhere and come back and show her that, at least, he felt no resentment of his dismissal. Perhaps, who knew? She would let him be her friend, her humble friend, though she would not accept him as her lover.

A boat was moored to the quay, just beneath him, and, for the sake of something to do, he strolled down and spoke to the captain.

"You've got fine weather," he said.

The man assented. "Yes, I'm hoping it will last," he said. "We sail this evening."

"Where are you going?" asked Gerald, absently.

"Coast o' France," replied the captain, cutting a slab of black tobacco and stowing it away carefully in his left cheek. "*I should have started last night, but one o' my hands 'as one up to Thraxton to see his mother, as is ill. I expected 'im back afore this, but I suppose she's worse. It's a ter-*

rible bad place to get a hand if you want one in a hurry. This 'ere Regna used to turn out the finest seamen in England; but since they've taken to salmon-fishin' they've got too lazy to go to sea. It's a darned sight more amusing to loaf about on the quay all day, and jest go out with a net for an hour or two while the tide suits. It's a kind o' gamblin', and once it gets hold of a man it's just as bad as other kinds o' gamblin'. If my man, don't turn up, I shall 'ave to sail short-handed; for sail I must to-night."

"I hope he'll turn up," said Gerald in his pleasant way. He sauntered away and walked along the cliff. After awhile it occurred to him that he was still in Regna, that he had not decided where to go. He thought of walking into Thraxton, taking the train for—anywhere. Then suddenly he remembered the coaster, and what the captain had said. Why shouldn't he offer himself in the place of the missing man, if he had not turned up? Gerald was a man who came to rapid decisions. The idea suited him. He walked back across the hills to the cottage, and going to his room, crammed some clothes into a canvas bag, exchanging those he had on for a rough jersey suit, not unlike that worn by fishermen.

He carried the bag down-stairs, intending to ask the lad belonging to the cottage to take the bag to the quay, but no one seemed to be about; old Hawker was not in his usual place, and Lucy was nowhere to be seen. He saw through the window that the vessel was getting ready to sail; if he meant to go by her, there was not a minute to lose. It occurred to him that the Hawkers might like to have some of the money that was due to them from him. He put a couple of sovereigns on the mantel-shelf, and shouldering his bag, left the house, thinking that he should be sure to meet Hawker or Lucy, to whom he could explain that he was going away for a few days.

But he met no one on his way to the quay; most of the men were at the salmon-fishing, and a shower had driven the women indoors. There was no time to hunt for some one to take a message, for the vessel was getting up her sails. He ran along the quay and jumped on board.

The captain looked at him with natural astonishment.

"Good-evening, captain. Has your man come back?"

"No," said the captain.

"If you haven't got another in his place," said Gerald, "*perhaps you'll take me! I know the work. In fact, I've served before.*"

The captain's astonishment had not yet subsided, but with the stolidity of his class, he acceded to the proposition.

"It's rather a queer fancy for a gentleman, ain't it, sir?" he said. "But you know your own mind, I suppose."

"The fact is, I want a change," said Gerald. "And a little hard work will do me good. Your cruise won't be a long one, I suppose?"

"Can't say," said the captain. "But you can leave the ship when we get to a French port. You can mess with me, if you like," he added; "and, take it bye and large, you won't be so very uncomfortable."

"I'm not afraid of that," said Gerald, with a short laugh, as he flung his bag on the deck. "Now, captain, I'm at your service."

They got the sails up, the anchor was weighed, and the smack sailed bravely from the quay. It was rather a singular fact, the significance of which did not strike Gerald until afterward, that no one on land had seen him go on board the "Susan," and that he had left no message behind him which could serve as a clew to his movements.

Just about the time Gerald had been sitting on the quay, Mordaunt Sapley was making his way by the crooked and unfrequented path to that part of the beach hidden by the projecting cliff from the view of the little harbor. He was walking slowly, and with a sullen and thoughtful countenance. He was going to meet Lucy. Only a few months ago he had trod the same path eagerly enough, but that was when his fancy for her was fresh and keen. Like all weak and selfish men, Mordaunt Sapley had drifted into his intimacy with Lucy without thinking of anything but the gratification of a passing desire, and without considering the consequences; and, in the first flush of his enjoyment of the conquest of the simple-hearted girl, he had thrust all thought of those consequences from him. But when he had begun to grow weary of her, they had commenced to loom ominously before him.

Matters were growing awkward. The little fool, as Mordaunt mentally called her, had actually believed in his promise to marry her. She was getting troublesome. It would have been awkward enough under any circumstances, but under those in which he was placed, it was most serious. He was entirely dependent on his father. At no time would Mr. Sapley have consented to Mordaunt's marrying the daughter of a *Regna* inn-keeper; certainly not now when he had actually set his mind upon Mordaunt's gaining the hand of the *mistress of Court Regna*. Mordaunt knew that, fond as he

father was of him, ambition occupied as large a share in his heart as affection for his son, and that if he, Mordaunt, were to dare to thwart that ambition, his father would cast him off without the least compunction. The idea of going to him and telling him that he would have the honor of being father-in-law to Lucy Hawker was not to be entertained for a moment.

Besides, Mordaunt himself never intended to keep his promise; never at any time, even in the first flush of his vicious passion; certainly not now, when he, too, began to think that there might be a chance of marrying Miss Sartoris. His heart beat fast with ambition and self-conceit as he told himself that Miss Sartoris had accepted his flower, and had smiled on him of late. Who knew? There might actually be something in his father's assertion that he could help him to become master of Court Regna.

He cursed himself as a fool for having got himself mixed up, entangled, with a low-bred love affair. If the slightest whisper of it reached the ears of Miss Sartoris, away went all chance of his success in that quarter; his father would be furious, and, in his fury, would probably disown his son and cast him on the world. So that he would lose not only all prospect of marrying Miss Sartoris, but of inheriting his father's ill-gotten wealth. What should he do? A change seemed to have come over Lucy lately. She, who used to be so docile, so yielding, had seemed to him to have grown impatient and even suspicious. He felt that his hackneyed promises and honeyed speeches would have no longer any effect. She had begun to doubt him.

His face grew darker, and he gnawed his lip as he went down the cleft in the rock toward the meeting-place, and it was only by an effort that he cleared his face from the scowl which made him look so like his father, as he came in sight of Lucy.

She was seated on a rock, and she did not spring forward to meet him as of old, but waited until he came close up to her, then she looked up at him with something like reproach in her eyes.

"You did not come last night, Mordaunt?" she said.

"I couldn't," he said, stooping to kiss her. "I was detained at work for the governor; but I'm here now. What's the matter? You look as if you'd lost a fortune."

She glanced at him, then gazed out at sea with a pathetic gravity.

"I have been thinking, Mordaunt," she said, "and when a woman thinks, when she has done what I have done, it

makes her sad. Mordaunt, I want you to listen to me. Don't be angry"—she clasped her hands tightly in her lap—"I want to tell you what I have decided to do."

"Well, what have you decided to do?" he said, with assumed lightness. "Something terrible?"

"Yes, it is terrible," she replied in a low voice. "I have resolved to tell my father."

He started, and his lips drew together. "Tell your father, Lucy?" he said. "Do you want to ruin me?"

"God knows I don't want to do that, Mordaunt!" she said, "but I can't bear it any longer. I seem as if my eyes were suddenly opened to the wickedness. I can't bear it any longer! Somehow, something seems to tell me that you have been deceiving me, that you never intended to make me your wife, never intended to let your father know!" She looked up at his face. It was very pale, and his eyelids were well down over his eyes.

"This is rather sudden, Lucy, isn't it?" he said. "You take me by surprise."

"It is sudden," she said. "It doesn't come all from myself. I've had advice, good advice."

He started. "Who's been giving you advice?" he demanded.

"Mr. Wayre."

His face flushed hotly, and he darted a look of positive hatred at her.

"Do you mean to say you told *him*?" he said, thickly.

"No, no; oh, no!" she said, with a little shudder; "but I met him last night, and he saw by my face that I was in trouble, and he advised me, in his kind, gentle way, to tell my father; and I must do so, Mordaunt."

Mordaunt's face cleared somewhat. He stood biting at his mustache. He had inherited something of his father's shrewdness, and he saw at once that it would be useless to remonstrate with her, or attempt to cajole her. What should he do? Ruin stared him in the face. If she told her father, old Hawker would go straight to Mr. Sapley; all Regna would be eager to avenge the wrong inflicted upon Lucy, who was the accepted belle of the place. He must temporize.

It is at such moments that terrible temptation assails such men as Mordaunt Sapley. Their very cowardice and weakness of character gives them a devilish strength. Your cowards will do anything, will commit any crime, to save his miserable skin, or secure his self-comfort. A terrible temptation assailed Mordaunt Sapley. The devil was whispering in

his ear, as he stood there in the gloaming, beside the innocent girl he had ruined. He tried weakly to put it from him, but it clung to him like the loathsome embrace of a serpent coiling round his heart. He laughed a discordant laugh, and Lucy looked up at him with a slight start.

"It's funny how things come about!" he said. "It's singular you should have arrived at this decision just as I have arrived at a solution of our little difficulty, Lucy."

"What do you mean, Mordaunt?" she asked.

"Why, I mean that I too have come to the conclusion that things can't go on like this any longer. It's not fair to you, dear. I know you think I'm selfish, and, perhaps, I am a little, but I don't lose sight of your interests also. Now, look here, dearest; I'm going to be quite plain with you. You tell your father, as you threaten, and I'm a ruined man, and you're ruined, too. There would be an awful row, and my father would cast me off without a penny, and we should be just as far away from being married as we are now. In fact, it's a foolish plan of yours, and I've got a far better one."

She looked at him patiently.

"Why shouldn't we go off together and be married quietly?"

The color flooded her face, and her lip trembled.

"Why shouldn't we go to-night?" he said. "We could catch the night mail from Thraxton, and be married in London to-morrow, or the day after. A day won't matter." He sneered covertly.

She rose, her hands clasped tightly, her face pale with emotion. "Mordaunt!" she breathed.

"Why not?" he said. "Nothing's easier. After we're married you can keep quiet in London. You can make some excuse for leaving so suddenly, or you can tell your father the truth and bind him to secrecy. He'll hold his tongue for your sake."

"Yes!" she murmured. "He would keep our secret—if we were married."

"Just so," said Mordaunt, "and as there's no time like the present, I say let us go to-night. My father's away, and will know nothing. I can come back in a day or two's time. Now, if you're willing, we'll start at once."

She looked round her confusedly. She was all of a tremble.

"I can't go like this, Mordaunt!" she breathed. "I must have some clothes!"

He had foreseen this, and he nodded assentingly. "Run up home and get what will go into a small bundle," he said

"Mind no one sees you, and come back as quickly as possible. Women are sharp at that kind of thing."

She did not notice the sneer. "Oh, Mordaunt! I am shaking all over," she said.

He drew her to him, and kissed her with a Judas kiss.

"It's all right!" he said. "Run up and get the bundle; I'll wait here. We'll walk along the cliff to Thraxton and catch the mail, and to-morrow, or the day after, you will be Mrs. Mordaunt Sapley!"

She stood for a moment with her hand to her head, then with a long look at him, a look of gratitude and love, she sped away.

When she had gone, Mordaunt Sapley sunk on to the rock where she had been sitting, and stared out to sea. A cold shaking fit seized him, and he shook like a leaf. The hellish thought in his mind was like the presence of a very devil, and overmastered him. Even then he would have turned back from the path upon which his feet were stepping, a path that shone redly as with blood; but it was too late, for though it had seemed to him but a few minutes, he heard her footsteps returning upon the rocky track, and he started to his feet, white still, but trembling no longer.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes," she panted. "I got the things without any one seeing me. Here they are. It is only a small bundle; you will not be ashamed of me, Mordaunt?"

"No, no!" he said, hastily. "Let us go. There is just time to catch the mail."

They ascended to the cliff path. She was panting still. He tried to speak, but could find no words; his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth. She must have felt the silence oppressive, for presently she said:

"Mordaunt, speak to me!"

He turned and looked at her.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She could not see his face, but there must have been something in the tone of his voice which gave her warning.

"Mordaunt!" she gasped. "I am afraid I can't do it! I can't go and leave my father without a word! Let us go back."

He gripped her arm. "Hold your tongue, you fool!" he hissed. "It's too late to go back!"

"I must! I must!" she cried. Unconsciously she raised her voice.

He gripped her still more tightly and looked round fearfully.

"Hold your tongue!" he said, thickly, his mouth close to her ear. "Some one will hear us!"

But fear had gained possession of her, a vague fear no less terrible for its vagueness.

"I will go no further, Mordaunt!" she said in broken accents. "Let me go back and tell my father?"

He laughed, and seized her other arm. "You'd rather ruin me, you fool!" he exclaimed.

"No! no! I don't want to ruin you, Mordaunt. Let me go back, and I'll promise not to say a word!"

"As if I'd trust you or any other woman," he snarled. His face wore the expression it had worn when he had beaten the terrier pup.

She strove to wrench her arms from his grasp. He had edged her, perhaps unconsciously, to the brink of the cliff. He heard the sea rolling in the dizzy depth below him, the devil of murder, that had been whispering at his ear for an hour past, now prompted him. He forced her still nearer the edge; then, as she swayed on the brink, he released her arms, and she fell over, with a cry that seemed to go through him like a knife.

CHAPTER XV.

THE moment she had fallen, Mordaunt realized what he had done. He stood alone on the edge of the cliff; the girl who had loved him so devotedly was lying on the beach beneath. He, who ought to have cherished and protected her against every ill, had taken her life.

He was a murderer!

As he realized the fact, Mordaunt, obeying the impulse which comes to every shedder of blood, looked round him fearfully. Had any one seen them together, had any one heard her terrible cry, the cry that was still ringing in his ears? All was still; he seemed to be alone, alone with the devil that had prompted him to do the deed, and now mocked him with a futile remorse.

At that moment Mordaunt Sapley would have bartered all his hopes of winning Claire, of inheriting his father's wealth, of life itself, for Lucy's presence once more beside him. The whole seemed like a hideous dream. Surely it was impossible that he, a gentleman, a 'Varsity man, who vaunted himself of his culture and refinement, could have stooped to a common, vulgar murder! What a fool he had been! If things

had come to the worst, if Lucy had carried out her threat, and made known their intrigue, matters would not have been so bad after all. He might have given the Hawkers' money, any amount of money, might have left Regna until the storm blew over. He had done no more than many another young man. *She* would have suffered; but people would have forgiven him his share in the business and soon forgotten it.

He tore at his lips as these thoughts passed through his mind, and cursed himself aloud. Then fears for his own safety began to crowd upon him. The body was lying on the beach; it would be found by one of the fishermen or coast-guard; if the tide washed it out to sea it would be picked up by one of the boats. He must do something with it! But what?

Looking round again, listening intently, he, stooping low, descended the cliff, going in a zigzag fashion from ledge to ledge in a way that he would not dared to have attempted in broad daylight and under ordinary circumstances. That he reached the bottom in safety is an extraordinary fact. The sky was cloudy, but the moon behind the drifts lent him sufficient light by which to see the slight form stretched out upon the shore.

She was lying upon a little strip of sand with her face upturned. He stumbled toward her, and, almost lying beside her, laid his hand upon her heart; it was quite still; he knew that she was dead. He gazed at the white face with a red streak across it from a wound on her forehead, gazed in a kind of stupor. Suddenly a kind of hope seized him. Why should not people think she had fallen over the cliff? The blood flew to his face, then left it white again, as a groan burst from his lips; his eyes had fallen upon her wrists, upon which were the red marks of his fingers; they would be black presently and would tell their own tale.

He rose to his feet, and, swaying to and fro, clasped his head in his hands. What should he do with the body? His eye fell upon a piece of wood, which had washed ashore from some wreck; its shape bore, or he fancied that it bore, some resemblance to a spade, and it gave him an idea. He sprung at it, and began to dig in the patch of sand. He dug with feverish energy, the sweat pouring off him in streams, his eyes never lifted from his task until he had excavated a hole some *three feet deep*. Then he straightened his back and *approached the body*. He went toward it slowly, looking over *his shoulder*, as if he dared not permit his eyes to rest on it. *Three or four times* his hands stretched out toward it before

he could summon courage to touch it, and when he did so, a shudder shook him from head to foot.

He dragged the body into the hole, and began to cover it with sand. What horrors seized and shook him during this grewsome business no pen can describe; once or twice he was compelled to stop, overcome by a deathly sickness. He fancied that he could see her face looking up at him reproachfully, could hear her voice pleading for her life.

When he had filled in the sand, he dragged some rocks and stones over the grave, arranging them as naturally as possible; then he stopped and looked seaward. In another hour the tide would cover the spot and smooth away all evidence of his work.

He was safe!

His brain was working acutely now, and he could plan. In case the body should by some miracle be recovered, and he should be suspected, it would be well for him to be able to prove an *alibi*. There was just time for him to get round the cliffs and on to the Thraxton road by a path he knew, before the tide rose. He would go into the hotel at Thraxton and talk with some one. Chance might help him.

He started off, and had rounded the point for which he was making just as the tide was within a foot of his path; then suddenly he stopped, and a hot wave rushed over him. The bundle which Lucy had been carrying! What had become of it? Had she dropped it on the cliffs? No; he felt sure that she had not done so; he remembered that it was slung upon her arm as he gripped her. It must be lying somewhere on the beach, somewhere near where she had fallen. He looked back; the tide was coming up, there would be no time to retrace his steps and return; he dared not risk climbing the cliff, for his knees shook under him and his head swam. He must leave it! But, oh, Heaven! the terrible danger that lurked in the discovery of that bundle! He made a slight detour so that he came in from inland. Just as he entered the town a man with a carrier's cart met him.

The man gave him good-night, and asked him the time. Mordaunt glanced at his watch by the light of the man's lantern, and was about to give him the right time; then, with a flash of cunning, he said ten, instead of half past.

"Lor'! I thought it was later," said the man.

"That's the right time," said Mordaunt, standing full in the light of the lantern and forcing a smile. "Good-night."

He went on and reached the hotel. Outside, he paused a moment, and then went round to the billiard-room which th

enterprising landlord had built at the back. He looked in at the window; the room was empty, the gas turned low. He opened the door stealthily, and entering, stretched himself full length upon one of the settees.

He lay there for about a quarter of an hour, when the billiard-marker entered.

"Good-evening, sir," he said, turning up the gas. "I didn't know any one was here, Mr. Sapley."

Mordaunt stretched himself and yawned. "I've been here this last hour or more," he said, daringly.

"Have you, now, sir?" said the marker. "I am very sorry. I've been busy in the bar. And you've been waiting for a game all this time?"

"It doesn't matter," said Mordaunt; "I just came over for the walk; came along the turnpike road, and, feeling rather tired, I fell asleep."

"You do look rather done up, sir," said the marker.

Mordaunt edged along the settee, out of the light of the billiard lamp.

"That's your fancy," he said, sharply. "I never felt better in my life. Get me a glass of brandy."

Immediately the man had left the room, Mordaunt sprung upon the settee and put the clock above his head half an hour behind time. It was an irregular clock at the best of times, as he knew well; but it would serve his purpose; at any rate, it would set up a doubt; and a doubt saves where murder is concerned. He had raced along from the beach; the carrier's evidence, the time by the billiard-room clock, would serve to set up an *alibi*.

The man came back with the brandy, and Mordaunt, with his back to him, only pretended to put in the water, and drank the spirit neat. He had a fifty game with the marker, and strove every nerve to win it—and did so, another point in his favor. What murderer would come red-handed from his deed of blood and win a game from the marker?

He talked and laughed more than usual, and when the game was over went and lolled against the bar, chaffing the bar-maid, while he drank some more brandy.

"You've got a long walk, Mr. Sapley," she said. "You'd better let us get the gig for you."

But he refused the offer. "I shall enjoy the walk," he said. "I've been resting here nearly a couple of hours."

He lighted a cigar, and left the hotel with a laugh on his lips. As he walked along he felt strangely excited. He had drunk the first lot of brandy neat, and had taken very little

water with the others, and, not being accustomed to raw spirits, they had taken effect upon him. After all, as he told himself as he walked along, things were not so bad. It wasn't murder, come to consider it coolly. She had edged toward the cliff of her own accord; he had only let go of her arms. And he was free of her! She had been a stumbling-block in his path, a standing menace. No one would find her, and if they did, no one would suspect him, Mr. Mordaunt Sapley, a 'Varsity man, of such a vulgar crime. He began to whistle, but presently the whistle died away. Exhaustion was coming upon him. He had gone through enough that night to drive even a strong-minded man into a lunatic asylum. When he reached the house he was limp and trembling. As he opened the door his father came into the passage. The sight of him gave Mordaunt a turn; he had not expected him back for a couple of days.

"Is that you, Mordy?" asked Mr. Sapley. "You're very late."

"I am, rather," said Mordaunt, trying to speak with his affected drawl.

Mr. Sapley looked at him as he followed into the parlor.

"What's the matter?" he asked, bending his brows.

"Matter?" said Mordaunt, thickly, and with a ghastly attempt at a smile; the light and the heat of the stuffy room made him reel. "Nothing. What should be the matter?"

Mr. Sapley peered at him. "You look queer," he said. "Where have you been?"

Mordaunt had hoped to reach his room unseen; this unexpected meeting with his father and his questioning unnerved him.

"I've been to Thraxton for a game of billiards," he said. "Beaten the marker, too. I've been there since nine o'clock. I say, since nine o'clock!"

Old Sapley eyed him keenly. "You've been drinking," he said.

Mordaunt laughed unsteadily. He welcomed the accusation.

"I've had a glass or two," he said. "The hotel liquor is thundering bad, and I fancy it's got into my head. Is there any soda water here?" He went to the sideboard, staggering slightly, and got a syphon. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

"No," said Mr. Sapley. "But I got my business done *quicker than I thought*. I was just in time to sell out of that company. It went smash the next day. No end of people

ruined over that business. Mostly clergymen and widows and people of that kind. I can't think how people can be such fools to put their money into such concerns; but they always do." He rubbed his chin, and his lips twisted into a smile. "I made a good thing out of that! Feel better now? It isn't like you to take too much, Mordy."

Mordaunt got the brandy decanter and poured out a liberal quantity.

"Oh, I'm all right," he said; "what were you saying?"

"I was saying that luck seemed to be standing fast by me," said old Sapley, taking some papers from his pocket and turning them over, "and while luck's with you, then is the time to strike out. How have you been getting on with Miss Sartoris?" He cast a shrewd glance at Mordaunt, who sat with his head resting on his hand.

"Oh, very well," said Mordaunt, with a laugh and a hiccough. "She's been very friendly with me—quite chummy. I gave her a flower the other day, and she took it as if she liked it."

Mr. Sapley stretched his mouth into a grin of satisfaction. "She did, did she?" he said. "That's right, Mordy! You stick to it. Keep on paying her little attentions and going on the humble and respectful dodge as I advised you; there's nothing gets over a woman like that. I know them! And when the time's ripe—strike! Don't you be afraid—take example by me—I've never been afraid to seize my luck when I saw it lying within my grasp. Remember that I'm at the back of you!"

Mordaunt looked up at him hazily. "This isn't the first time you've hinted at some kind of power you've got over Miss Sartoris, guv'nor. What does it mean?"

Mr. Sapley's expression changed at once to one of cunning cautiousness.

"Never you mind," he said, pursing his lips and nodding with a kind of grim self-satisfaction. "You do your part and I'll do mine. Your part's the love-making, and with your education and the rest of it, you ought to be able to do it well enough, or what was the use of my sending you to college. But look here, Mordy," he went on more gravely, "there must be no more of this kind of thing! You must keep off the drink. And there must be no philandering with *any other girl*. I've heard that you've been seen once or *twice with that girl of old Hawker's—what's her name? Lucy—*"

Mordaunt's face went white, and then crimson, and he started to his feet, clutching the table.

"Who says that?" he demanded, shrilly. "It's a lie! It's a d——d lie!"

Mr. Sapley was startled at his vehemence, and the two looked at each other across the table in silence for a moment, then old Sapley said, almost apologetically:

"All right, Mordy; there's no need to get into a fury. I only tell you what I've heard, and remind you that you've got to be cautious. There's nothing a woman will forgive sooner than a man fooling about another woman. But if you say there's nothing in it, why, there isn't, and I'm satisfied."

"There isn't," said Mordaunt, sullenly, and covertly moistening his lips, which were dry and burning. "The girl's nothing to me; I've scarcely spoken to her—not more than any other girl in the place! What do you mean?" As he spoke, he stretched out his hand for the spirit decanter; but his father seized his arm.

"All right, all right, Mordy," he said, soothingly. "You've had enough for to-night; let the brandy alone, and go to bed."

Mordaunt's hands fell limply on the table. "Perhaps you're right," he said, with a shaky laugh, and with uncertain steps he left the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN Claire came down to breakfast the next morning she was rather paler than usual, and there were dark shadows under her eyes.

"You are not looking well, dear, this morning," said Mrs. Lexton, with tender solicitude.

"I have had a bad night," said Claire, quietly. "I shall be all right when we've had a drive."

The night had been altogether a sleepless one for her. The doubts which always follow decisive action had assailed her through the silent hours of the night. After all, had she been just to Gerald? Her love for him took up arms and fought in his behalf. Had she any right to doubt his love, to send him away with that curt "No," because of a flirtation which, perhaps, was quite innocent and harmless? Very probably Lucy had thrown herself in his way, and he had meant nothing more than that kind of friendliness which a man of the world would extend to a simple village girl. Something within her championed Gerald's cause and made her think that she had been needlessly cruel, both to him and herself.

His words rang in her ears with the accents of truth, and she almost regretted bitterly her refusal of him.

But regrets were futile now. He was too proud to repeat his offer of love; he would avoid her while he was compelled to remain at Regna, and then pass from her life forever!

It is scarcely too much to say that if Gerald had presented himself that morning she would have confessed her love and refrained even from asking for an explanation.

After breakfast the carriage was ordered for a long drive to a distant farm, and Claire was waiting on the terrace, with her head resting on her hand and her eyes fixed dreamily on the sea, across which Gerald was at this moment sailing, when Lee passed close below her. He touched his hat, and then stopped.

Claire roused herself, and wished him good-morning.

"Good-morning, miss," said Lee, respectfully and hesitatingly. "Have you seen Mr. Wayre this morning, miss?"

The color rose to Claire's face for a moment. "No," she said.

"I asked, miss, because I wanted to see him, and I didn't know whether he'd be here this morning."

"Why not?" asked Claire, trying to speak indifferently.

"Well, miss," said Lee, "Mr. Wayre was looking very knocked up last night—quite ill, as you may say, and I made so bold as to advise him to take a holiday."

Claire averted her face. "Perhaps he has done so," she said, coldly.

"I'm thinking he may have done so, miss," he said, "seeing as he's not here. He's generally first on the works. I shouldn't want to trouble him," he went on, shyly, "but I've lost one of the plans. He may have taken it with him by mistake; I think I'll walk down to the cottage. Good-morning, miss."

Claire's heart sunk. Had he gone away already?

The carriage came round, and they started for their drive. Claire was very silent for a time; then, as she felt that Mrs. Lexton was watching her anxiously, she roused herself and assumed a cheerfulness she was far from feeling. It seemed as if something had gone out of her life, as if the brightness which had of late warmed and illuminated it had become overclouded.

They stayed for some little time at the farm, and Claire proposed that they should go home another way, which would *take them through Regna*. She would not have admitted to *herself that her reason for doing so was her desire to learn it*

Gerald had gone. As they drove along the road above the Hawkers' cottage they saw a small group of persons on the terrace talking together with evident signs of excitement. Amongst them Claire discerned Lee.

"Something seems to be the matter, Claire," said Mrs. Lexton. "Oh, dear, I hope it isn't an accident."

Claire stopped the carriage. "We will go down and see," she said.

As they approached the cottage, the group became silent, and touching their hats, looked awkward and constrained.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Claire.

"Well, we don't rightly know, miss," said a fisherman. "There's something wrong in there," and he jerked his head toward the cottage.

"Something wrong? Some one ill?" asked Claire. "Who is it?"

"It's Miss Lucy, miss," said the man.

"Lucy ill!" said Claire; and she hastened to the cottage.

The door was open, and she entered. Old Hawker was sitting at the table, with his head bowed upon his hands. He looked up, and his face struck Claire with a foreboding of some great trouble.

"Oh, what is the matter, Captain Hawker?" she asked.

He rose, leaning heavily on the table. "It's my geli, Lucy, miss," he said, hoarsely.

"Lucy? What is wrong with her?" asked Claire.

"She's gone!" said the old man, brokenly.

"Gone?" repeated Claire.

"Yes, miss," he said, huskily. "She's left me! My gell Lucy!"

Claire was silent for a moment, and then she said: "Try and tell me all about it, Captain Hawker. Perhaps you are distressing yourself without cause."

The old man shook his head. "No, miss. She's gone, right enough! Gone without a word!"

"When did she go?" asked Claire.

"Last night," he said, hoarsely. "Without a word!"

"But there may be no cause for alarm," said Claire, soothingly. "She may have gone to pay a visit to some friend, and been detained—remained the night. She will be here presently."

The old man tried to accept the encouragement, but shook his head and groaned.

"Where could she have gone, miss?" he said. "She could have sent word, or would have been back early this

morning. No, miss, she's left me! Last night she took some things—clothes—with her, and stole away. I shall never see her again!"

"Oh, why should you think that?" said Claire.

"It's borne home upon me, miss!" he said. "I know it as certain as if I saw her dead this very moment." He sunk into the chair and hid his face with his huge rough hands. Then he let them fall, and looked out of the window with stolid despair. "I've noticed a change in her for some time past, miss," he said. "She was nervous and timid like, sometimes moping, and sometimes wild and gay like. I've noticed it!"

"Where do you think she has gone?" asked Claire.

He shook his head.

"Do not despair," said Claire. "Perhaps you'll hear from her by this very next post, explaining everything."

"No, miss," he said, almost inaudibly. "She'll be too 'shamed to write!"

"Ashamed?" echoed Claire.

"Yes, miss," he said, huskily. "She's not gone alone."

"Not gone alone?" said Claire, with a vague presentiment of what was coming.

"No, miss. She's gone with him—curse him!"

Claire's eyes asked with whom; her lips refused to frame the question.

"With Mr. Wayre!" said the old man.

Claire caught the edge of the table, for a sudden faintness assailed her.

"Oh, no, no!" she breathed. "Not with him!"

"Ay, you may well be took back, miss," he said, bitterly.

"He's deceived us all. I thought him as honest and open as the day—a true gentleman. But he's proved himself a villain!"

"No, no!" said Claire. "It is not true. You have no right—" Her heart revolted against the accusation. That the man who stood before her but a few hours since could be guilty of the mean betrayal of an innocent girl seemed preposterous and impossible! She controlled herself by a great effort. "There is some mistake!" she said, almost calmly.

"I do not know very much of Mr. Wayre," her lips trembled, "but I know he is incapable of doing what you suspect."

"There's no mistake, miss," said the old man, shaking his head. "He left last night, too, and without a word. Why should he go, and at the same time, and so suddenly? He *wasn't* thinking of going. He only waited to take a few

things in a bag; the room's all untidy, and littered as he threw the things about."

Claire sunk into a chair. A sudden weakness seemed to have fallen upon her. "I can not believe it!" she murmured, more to herself than to him.

"It is impossible!" whispered Mrs. Lexton, who had been standing inside the door. She was almost as moved as Claire, for she had taken a great liking to Gerald, and had even less cause to suspect him than Claire had.

The old man shook his head again. "Ay, so any one would have said, mum," he said. "But there's other things besides his going so suddenly and at the same time. He and Lucy have been seen together, walking alone at night, and in out-of-the-way places. Folks can tell you—now it's too late!" he added, bitterly.

"They was always together," said a woman amongst the group outside the door. "I see 'em last night!" As she spoke, Mr. Sapley pushed his way through.

"What's this I hear?" he began; then he saw Claire, and removed his hat. Close behind him followed Mordaunt. He was looking haggard, and just as a man does after a night's heavy drinking. He would have given all he possessed to have been able to keep away from the village; but he could not. Something seemed to draw him toward it; a loathsome craving to learn what effect Lucy's disappearance had created, and how the village folks would explain her sudden and unexpected absence.

He did not enter the room, but stood just outside the door, trying to call a little color into his cheeks, and to assume an air of benevolent interest.

Old Sapley listened with bent brows to old Hawker's story, and Mordaunt, as he, too, listened, felt a sudden thrill of malignant satisfaction which at last sent the desired color to his cheeks.

"Gone off with Miss Lucy!" said old Sapley, grimly. "That's a bad business!"

A sudden inspiration fell upon Mordaunt—one of those inspirations which often come to the criminal whose brain is sharpened by mingled fear and cunning. He stepped inside the room.

"I don't believe it!" he said, quite warmly. "I beg your pardon, Miss Sartoris. Perhaps I've no right to express an opinion, as I don't know all the circumstances of the case; but I can't help saying that I don't believe it!"

Claire raised her eyes and looked at him with a sudden hope. He caught the glance, and followed up his happy idea.

"Mr. Wayre and I have never been very great friends," he said, with an affectation of candor. "I don't think we liked each other, but in common fairness I am bound to say that I don't think Mr. Wayre would be guilty of this that is laid to his charge."

Claire's lips moved. Her eyes were fixed upon his face. She felt grateful to him. Knowing as she did of his encounter with Gerald on the night of his arrival, his conduct in standing up for the absent man seemed to her magnanimous to a degree. Mordaunt understood the expression in her eyes, and his heart warmed as if he were actually as noble as he seemed.

"Mr. Wayre was a gentleman," he said. "He had his faults, like most of us, but I am sure that he was incapable of such baseness as this. It's true that we don't know very much about him, but one can read a man's character pretty correctly, even after a short acquaintance, and, as I have said, you will find that Mr. Wayre knows nothing whatever of this business, and is in no way connected with Miss Lucy's disappearance."

Claire rose. "Thank you," she said, almost inaudibly. "Mr. Wayre will himself thank you when he returns."

Poor old Hawker shook his head. "He won't come back!" he said in a kind of stupor. "He's been seen with her; he's taken her away from me!"

"Who has seen Mr. Wayre with her?" asked Mordaunt, turning upon the group at the door.

There was an awkward silence for a moment or two, then the woman who had spoken before, said, half sullenly: "I've seen 'em, and there's several more as 'ev seen 'em; Jenks for one." And she turned appealingly to Jenks, the coastguard. He had been standing on the edge of the crowd, smoking his pipe, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and with an air of not desiring to take any part in the discussion. The man had rather a sharp, hatchet-shaped face, with small, shifty eyes, and these eyes had been watching Mr. Mordaunt as that gentleman spoke in Gerald's defense. Appealed to now by the woman, and with every eye upon him, he moved *uneasily*, and without taking his pipe from his mouth, *muttered, reluctantly*:

"Yes, I've seen 'em!"

Mordaunt looked at him. "When?" he asked.

"The other night, on the cliff path," said Jenks, without raising his eyes.

Mordaunt seemed staggered for a moment at this combined testimony; then he said, boldly: "But what does all this prove? Nothing! Surely a gentleman may be seen talking to a well-conducted girl like Lucy Hawker without being suspected of any evil designs! Why, any one of us, under such circumstances, may easily lay ourselves open to a similar charge, if the mere fact of being seen with a person of the opposite sex is considered sufficient cause for suspicion."

Mr. Sapley, who had been regarding his son with covert surprise—for he knew that Mordaunt hated Gerald—muttered: "I ought to have sent him to the Bar!" Then he said, aloud:

"It seems to me we're wasting time. The girl can't have gone far. It ought not to be difficult to trace her; she would be seen and recognized at Thraxton Station, and we could telegraph and put the police on her track."

"I'll have no perlice set on my gell!" said old Hawker, with sudden vehemence.

His father's speech had driven the color from Mordaunt's face. It was from such practical minds as that of his father he had most to fear.

"Captain Hawker is quite right," he said. "I can quite understand his feelings. Publicity must—er—be—avoided as much as possible. We must study Captain Hawker's feelings."

Old Sapley knit his brows and looked at his son in astonishment. He was coming out in quite a new character. Mr. Sapley could scarcely repress a grin.

"What should you advise, Mordaunt?" he said, half mockingly.

"Inquiries must be made, of course," said Mordaunt, "and if Captain Hawker will permit me, I shall be glad to do what I can. I will go down to Thraxton; I will ride to the junction and wire inquiries."

"They may have crossed the Channel from here or from the next port," suggested old Sapley, showing by the "they" that he, at any rate, believed Gerald guilty.

"She may!" admitted Mordaunt. "In that case, I fear pursuit will be almost hopeless."

"She's gone with him!" muttered old Hawker, brokenly.

"I will go at once," said Mordaunt. "One of you go up to the house and bring my horse."

A barefooted boy, delighted with the errand, darted off.

Claire rose and laid her hand—it trembled—upon the old man's shoulder. "Do not lose all hope," she said, pityingly. "Mr. Mordaunt will make inquiries at once. He will be sure to find her. No one in these days of the telegraph can disappear without being traced."

"God bless you, miss!" said the old man. "But I know it's of no use. I shall never see her again!"

Claire went outside. Mr. Mordaunt was standing talking to the group, and he turned to her at once.

"Let me take you to your carriage, Miss Sartoris?" he said. His tone was quite different to his usual one; all the foolish affectation was gone out of him. Strange as it may seem, his crime and the terrible danger in which he stood had almost made a man of Mr. Mordaunt Sapley. Life had become a fearfully serious thing for him, and his foolish Oxford tricks of speech and manner were cast from him.

As they walked to the carriage Claire said in a low voice: "You have behaved very nobly this morning, Mr. Mordaunt. You have stood up in defense of one who, being absent, is unable to defend himself."

The blood shot to Mordaunt's face. What a lucky idea that was of his! "I only said what I thought," he said. "I do *not* think Mr. Wayre guilty."

"Nor I," said Claire, trying to control her voice, "though circumstances—"

"Circumstantial evidence should never be relied upon, or hardly ever," he said. "Many an innocent man has been hung upon it. But even supposing that Mr. Wayre has gone off with Lucy Hawker, it doesn't follow that he intends to do her a wrong."

Claire had entered the carriage, and she turned her face to him with parted lips.

"I mean," he said, "that he may marry her. Why not? She is, I believe, an extremely nice girl, rather above her station, and Mr. Wayre may consider her quit fit to be his wife."

Claire said nothing, but drew her veil over her face.

"May I come and tell you the result of my inquiries, Miss Sartoris; you would like to hear?"

"Thank you. If you please— Yes; I shall be glad."

The carriage drove away. When it had gone, the reaction set in upon Mordaunt. The flush that the excitement of *playing his part* had caused died away, and his face resumed *its worn and haggard* appearance. What a terrible path he *was treading*? He was like a man walking on the edge of a

volcano. And yet what had he to fear? Fate seemed to have come to his assistance. That Gerald Wayre should have disappeared so suddenly and without cause was providential for him, Mordaunt. It was true that Wayre might return at any moment; but, at any rate, time was gained. Who knew; Fate might stand by him still! At any rate, he held the threads of the tangled web in his hand. If he could hide his guilty secret, could keep Gerald Wayre from returning and proving his innocence, he might follow up the steps he had gained in Miss Sartoris's favor. For a moment or two his dread gave way to the flattering unction of ambition. Lucy out of the way, he was free to win the good-will of the mistress of Court Regna.

The boy came clattering down the road with his horse. Mordaunt gave him a shilling, and mounting, rode quickly toward Thraxton. As he came to the bend of the road, leading to Regna, a figure stepped out from the side path and stood in his way. It was Jenks, the coastguard.

Mordaunt was riding past, but something in the man's face arrested him, and he pulled up.

"Well, what is it, Jenks?" he asked, impatiently. "Has anything further been discovered?"

Jenks looked at the empty pipe he held in his hand, and shook his head.

"Not as I knows of, sir," he said, still keeping his eyes on his pipe. "I was only going to ask your honor for a bit o' 'bacca!"

Mordaunt's face flushed angrily. "Is this a time to stop me on such an excuse?" he said, hotly. "You're always begging for tobacco!"

Jenks still looked at his pipe impassively.

"No offense, sir," he said. "I'm a poor man, and 'bacca costs a deal o' money."

Mordaunt swore at him again. "I haven't any," he said. "Get out of my way!"

Jenks did not move. He stood right in front of the horse, and looked as if he meant to lay hold of the bridle.

"Perhaps yer honor'll give me the price of a pipe?" he said.

As he spoke, he raised his shifty eyes with a peculiar expression to Mordaunt's face. Mordaunt went scarlet with anger, and his lips parted with another oath; but something in the man's small eyes—was it a menace?—struck Mordaunt dumb. The color left his face, and he sat like a man under a spell.

A sudden fear, springing from whence he knew not, cramped his heart.

"Confound you!" he said; "you are a confirmed beggar!"

He took a coin from his pocket, scarcely conscious that it was a sovereign, and flung it to the ground, and rode on, cursing himself for a fool for being frightened at a man's glance.

Jenks picked up the coin and looked over his shoulder at the retreating horseman, with a strange smile. "You're a bold 'un!" he muttered.

CHAPTER XVII.

THERE was very little work done in Regna for the remainder of that day. The people stood about in groups discussing Lucy's disappearance with mingled sorrow and indignation; for the Hawkers were old inhabitants and very much respected, and Lucy herself had been the acknowledged belle of the place. Of course, the women blamed her, while the men freely cursed Gerald; and not one of them had the least suspicion of the real criminal. By some it was thought that Lucy was too good a girl to be led astray, and that she was either already secretly married, or that Gerald would marry her at the earliest opportunity; Mordaunt Sapley's boldly declared opinion naturally carried some weight.

But old Hawker refused to be comforted, and was still firmly convinced that he should never see Lucy again. There was a good deal of pride about Regna; it was a little place by itself, full of a certain independence and jealous of its reputation, and it was unanimously agreed that the scandal should be hushed up as closely as possible; so that whatever they thought, they openly declared their belief that things would turn out all right, and that Lucy would return "an honest woman."

Mordaunt Sapley did not come back until the next day. He had left his horse at Thraxton and had gone down the line, ostensibly to make inquiries. He rode straight to the cottage with his report, and though he looked haggard and worn, as a man might be expected to look who had been traveling so *many hours* without rest, he bore a cheerful and encouraging *countenance*. His reappearance had been noticed, and a small *group* gathered round the door, and he addressed them as *much as the bereaved father*.

"You were right and I was wrong," he said, gravely. "She *has* gone with Mr. Wayre."

A murmur rose, and old Hawker groaned and clinched his hand.

"I traced them as far as Welby Junction, and there I found that a gentleman, answering to Mr. Wayre's description, in company with a young girl, had taken tickets for London. They failed to identify her by my description, but a porter remembered seeing the gentleman carrying a bundle wrapped in a large blue cotton apron or handkerchief." He paused and looked inquiringly, and one of the women said:

"Ay, that's Lucy's right enough! She must have wrapped her things up in it."

Mordaunt Sapley moistened his lips covertly. "That removes all doubt, then," he said. "I could have placed the matter in the hands of the police, but, as I said yesterday, I did not think it would be well to do so, and I have communicated with a friend in London with whom my father does business, and asked him to make inquiries. He will spare no expense, and I have no doubt that we shall soon hear of the fugitive."

The listeners murmured their approval, and old Hawker stammered a few words of gratitude.

"I am still confident," said Mordaunt, as he mounted his horse, "that Mr. Wayre will act honorably by your daughter; and if he should not have already done so, we will find some means of compelling him. I should advise you to talk about the matter as little as possible, and to think of her as charitably as you can. After all," he concluded, with a forced smile, "she is not the only girl who has run away from home and made a secret marriage."

Mordaunt Sapley was not by any means a favorite; but a great many who heard him felt convinced that he was a better sort of man than they had thought him, and they agreed that he had acted in this matter as a true friend to the Hawkers and to Regna in general.

Mordaunt rode straight up to the Court, feeling that his dusty, travel-stained appearance would count in his favor with Miss Sartoris. He was shown into the library, and presently Claire came to him. He noticed that a change had taken place in her appearance since he had last seen her. She was no paler than usual, but there was a set look about her eyes and lips as if she had suffered from the painful event, and as if she were trying to subdue all signs of that suffering.

"I have come up at once, Miss Sartoris," he said, "for I

thought you would like to hear what news I had as soon as possible."

"Thank you," said Claire. She stood with one hand resting on the table, her face turned toward the window, as if she felt strong enough to permit the light to fall upon her countenance. No one can describe what Claire had suffered during these hours of suspense; but she was not one to wear her heart upon her sleeve, and her natural pride had come to her assistance in her struggle to appear calm and unmoved. Mordaunt Sapley, as he glanced at her sideways, thought that she looked almost imperial, notwithstanding the youthfulness of the lovely face and the slimness of the girlish figure. Even at that moment he compared her with the girl he had been "fool enough" to fancy, as he mentally put it, and he wondered how he could ever have bestowed a thought upon Lucy Hawker while Miss Sartoris shone like a star within his ken.

"Have you discovered anything?" asked Claire.

He was careful to repeat, almost word for word, what he had said at the Hawkers' cottage.

"I regret that I was wrong in expressing my belief in Mr. Wayre's innocence," he wound up. "But I am still convinced that Mr. Wayre will act as an honorable man and marry the girl. Why he should have persuaded her to fly with him in this clandestine manner I can not imagine; but no doubt he will explain his reason when he returns."

Claire averted her face slightly, a faint tremor had passed over her lips.

"You think that he will return?" she said in a low voice.

Mordaunt looked at her with real or affected surprise. "Will he not be compelled to do so?" he said. "There is the building—"

Claire moved to the window. "I should wish that to be stopped now," she said.

Mordaunt Sapley's heart leaped exultingly.

"But the contract has been entered into with Lee," he said; "the work has been commenced."

Claire raised her head proudly and looked straight before her. "Mr. Lee can be compensated," she said. "Surely I am not compelled to go on with it if I do not like to do so?"

"No, no, certainly not," assented Mordaunt. "It is entirely a matter of money; I will speak to my father, and we will take steps to stop the work immediately. In any case, it *would not be well to go on during Mr. Wayre's absence; and, under any circumstances, we have only to carry out your wishes,*"

"Thank you," said Claire, turning to him, and for the first time noticing his pale face and dusty condition. "Have you not been home yet? Will you not have some wine?"

He thanked her gratefully, but declined. "My father will be anxious to hear my report," he said, "and I will not keep him waiting any longer."

"It was very kind of you to come to the Court first," said Claire.

He begged her not to mention it, and as he opened the door, he said, with admirably simulated sincerity:

"Forgive me, Miss Sartoris, if I ask you not to condemn Mr. Wayre, but withhold your judgment."

He rather overacted his part; a slight color rose to Claire's face.

"It can be of very little importance, Mr. Mordaunt, whether I condemn Mr. Wayre or not. I trust, for Lucy's sake, that your opinion of him may be a correct one."

Mordaunt bowed himself out deferentially, and went for his horse, which he had sent round to the stables. As he passed through the shrubbery in which Mrs. Burdon's cottage was hidden, he saw the old lady sitting on her usual bench in the sunlight. He was passing on with the nod which Mr. Mordaunt Sapley was in the habit of throwing to his inferiors, when Mrs. Burdon raised her head, and shading her eyes with one hand, beckoned to him with the other.

Mordaunt stopped reluctantly, and regarded her with impatient contempt.

"Have you seen his lordship this morning?" she quavered.

"What does she mean?" Mordaunt asked of the girl in charge of the old woman. "Do you mean Lord Wharton?" he inquired, addressing the old woman and raising his voice. "He's dead—long ago."

"Dead!" quavered Mrs. Burdon, as if appalled. "Not dead?"

"Yes, of course he's dead!" said Mordaunt.

"It can't be true," she muttered, wringing her hands. "You're deceiving me, Mr. Sapley. I know you! You're young Sapley, from Thraxton, the new agent."

"You take me for my father," said Mordaunt, angrily.

"I know you well enough," she repeated, "and his lordship will rue the day when he put trust in you!"

Mordaunt flushed angrily; but before he could speak, she went on in a trembling voice: "Dead! That can't be; he came to see me a few days ago. When was it? And he was

young and strong then, with his young bride by his side. But I mustn't speak of her!"

"What's she talking about?" said Mordaunt, impatiently, to the young girl.

She colored, and let fall the piece of needle-work she held in her hand. "She's thinking of Mr. Wayre, sir," she said, dropping a nervous courtesy. "Nurse mistook the gentleman for Lord Wharton."

Mordaunt laughed contemptuously. "She's worse than ever," he said. "If she gets any madder we shall have to shut her up." And he walked away, leaving the old woman to murmur, incredulously, "Dead? Dead?"

By the time Mordaunt had reached home he was feeling worn out, and his father looked at him curiously as he entered the parlor.

"You've got back from this wild-goose chase, Mordaunt?" he said.

Mordaunt dropped into a chair and wiped his face, and began to tell his father just what he had told to the village and Claire. Old Sapley knit his heavy brows and regarded him keenly.

The change that had come over his son was not likely to escape Mr. Sapley's notice. From a mass of affectation and self-conceit Mordaunt had suddenly become transformed into a grave and serious man of action. His father was puzzled. How had the change been wrought?

"So you have discovered that this fellow Wayre has been fool enough to go off with the girl? I could have told you that, and saved you the trouble of tearing about the country. And why you should take that trouble puzzles me!" he added, his small eyes fixed piercingly on Mordaunt's face.

Mordaunt winced, but smiled with an affectation of cunning.

"Miss Sartoris was anxious to know the truth," he said. "I have just been up to the Court to tell her."

"Ah!" muttered old Sapley, as if he saw light. "It was done to please her? Quite right! You can't take too much trouble in that direction, Mordy."

Mordaunt drew a breath of relief. He feared his father's terrible keenness more than anything else.

"Miss Sartoris wishes the work at the Court to be stopped at once," he said, significantly.

Mr. Sapley nodded with keen approval.

"Is that so?" he said. "By George! Mordy, you seem to have woke up to some purpose! You've got some brains

after all! You're on the right tack. We'll have done with Mr. Gerald Wayre for a time, at any rate; and I tell you what, Mordy, it's as well that he should be out of the way. I'm inclined to believe that you were right in being a little jealous of him. She was getting too thick with him. I hear that he dined at the Court the night before he left, and that she treated him like an equal; he was singing in the drawing-room, and all that kind of thing. This business of old Hawker's girl has come just in time; it will teach her to be more careful, in future, how she hobnobs with strangers who come from nobody knows where. I expect he'll get a cool reception when he comes back."

"He must not come back!" said Mordaunt, unguardedly. "The work is stopped. It must not be recommenced; at all costs, Gerald Wayre must be kept away."

His father looked at him penetratingly.

"Well, we shall see!" he said. "But don't you be afraid of Gerald Wayre, or any one else. I've got a trump card up my sleeve!"

Mordaunt looked up as sharply as his condition would permit.

"What's that?" he asked, eagerly.

Old Sapley nodded and chuckled.

"Never you mind, Mordy!" he said; "you'll find out all in good time. You'd better go to bed, for you look as if you'd been up for a week instead of a night." Mordaunt obeyed, again asking himself the purport of his father's hint. He went to his room, threw himself upon the bed, with a groan of utter weariness and exhaustion. He tried to tell himself that all was well; that not only was his awful secret safe, but that he was taking long strides along the path which his father's suggestion, and his own recently awakened ambition, was opening up to him. He tried to picture himself as the master of Court Regna; but when he fell asleep at last, he saw Lucy's white face, as it had appeared to him when he covered it with the sand, and the missing bundle floated threateningly through all his feverish dreams.

When he came down to breakfast the next morning, the old Mordaunt Sapley seemed to have been left still further behind.

"All right after your night's rest?" asked his father.

"I am quite right," said Mordaunt in his new tone.

Old Sapley regarded him keenly.

"In respect to this business of the building," he said. "I've been thinking it over, and I've come to the conclusion that it will be as well if I leave it as much to you

possible. You make arrangements with Lee—of course you won't pay him more than you can help—and have the place tidied up as well as they can do it. I'll hand over the business of the estate, too, to you. You'll have to see Miss Sartoris every day, you know." He drew his huge mouth into a smile. "I dare say she'd rather do business with a good-looking young fellow, an Oxford man, and almost one of her own class, rather than with a crusty old fellow like me. Humor her, Mordy, my boy—humor her! Use every opportunity you get! You're the only young man about her, now that fellow Wayre has gone, and—well, women are only women after all, however high their station. You were speaking to me about that bay hunter of Grimley's. You can have it, Mordy, if you like—though it's a long price, and more than it's worth; but a woman likes to see a man well mounted."

Mordaunt thanked his father in quite a different fashion to that which he would have adopted a few days ago, and went down to the Court.

He found Lee hanging about disconsolately, and informed him of Miss Sartoris's desire that the work should be stopped. Lee offered no objection; indeed, he declared that without the missing plan, which, presumably, Gerald had unwittingly taken with him, the work could not be continued.

"Mr. Wayre will be back presently, sir," he said, stoutly. "For, of course, this story of his having gone off with Lucy Hawker is all nonsense. Mr. Wayre isn't that sort of gentleman." The young fellow threw back his head, and flushed hotly. "He's just gone off for a holiday, as I advised him, and I'd stake my life that he has no more to do with this business than—than you have, Mr. Mordaunt."

Mordaunt winced and turned away suddenly.

The rubbish was cleared away, and the half-demolished wing was left standing in as good order as possible. Mr. Mordaunt went to the Court that day and had an interview with Miss Sartoris. He was at the Court every day, in fact, taking the place of his father, and Claire got accustomed to seeing and consulting him instead of the elder Sapley. Under his changed condition, Mordaunt's manner had become ingratiating, and almost pleasing. To Mrs. Lexton, for instance, he was particularly amiable, and she more than once remarked that Mr. Mordaunt Sapley was a singularly agreeable gentleman.

And bit by bit he wormed his way, after a fashion which delighted his father, into the good graces, not only of Claire,

but of all at the Court. He seemed to have an eye for everything, and especially for anything that tended to increase Claire's comfort and convenience.

Insensibly she began, woman-like, to lean upon him as, certainly, she had ever leaned upon his father. There was no detail respecting the estate too minute for him, and, unlike his father, he appeared to share all Claire's sentiments toward the tenants. It was he who suggested that a percentage should be remitted from their rents, and who pleaded for the retention of tenants who could not meet their liabilities.

His old Oxford manner seemed to have dropped off him as the skin drops from a serpent, and he was now always grave and in earnest. Scarcely a day passed without Claire's meeting him. Sometimes he took afternoon tea with her and Mrs. Lexton, and as he was always entertaining, Claire had almost overcome her dislike of him. It was true that to her he was just her man of business and nothing more; but he was pleasanter to deal with than his father, and she was glad of the exchange. She was singularly pleased. Shut up, because of her mourning, at the Court, Mordaunt Sapley was her only medium of intercourse with the outside world, and, woman-like, she grew accustomed to him.

It never occurred to her that he should dare to dream of becoming anything closer than her man of business, and she was therefore all the more free and less constrained in her intercourse with him.

The days passed into weeks, while Mordaunt Sapley was making his insidious progress, and nothing was heard of Gerald Wayre. But for the half-demolished wing and his haunting presence in Claire's own heart, he might never have existed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE "Susan" was a trim craft. Though she has been called a smack, she was almost large enough to rank as a ketch, for her hold was capacious.

In addition to the old captain and Gerald, she carried three men and a boy. Gerald saw at once that the captain, whose name was Joslin, was a good seaman by the way in which he handled his vessel. Like most of the west-country folk, he was rather a reserved and self-contained man, and at first, *beyond a glance now and again at Gerald, he took no special notice of him.* The weather was fair, and the wind favorable, *and after the "Susan" had got well started on her course.*

there was nothing for Gerald to do. He had done his share of the work quietly and without fuss, and when sails were all set, the deck tidied up as neatly as a man-o'-war's, he felt at liberty to seat himself on the combing and light a pipe.

It is scarcely necessary to say that all his thoughts were fixed on Claire. It is also scarcely necessary to say that not a single drop of bitterness tinged the current of those thoughts. Some men would have felt extremely bitter at the curt way in which Claire had refused his offer. They would have mentally inveighed against the pride of wealth and station which could harden such a heart as even Claire Sartoris's; but Gerald was too generous and too much in love to entertain these feelings. He was sick and sore with disappointment, and combined with his disappointment was a vague sense of surprise and bewilderment, but no bitterness.

Claire had seemed to him the last woman in the world to set so great a value on her wealth and position as to permit them to sway her actions where her heart was concerned. Why had she—well, yes—encouraged him? for surely there had been more than common kindness in her voice and in her eyes as he spoke to her by the piano. Why had she not repulsed him at the moment and not waited till the morning to give him his dismissal with a single word? He sighed and puffed vigorously at his pipe as the question beat about his mind. It never occurred to him that she had seen his meeting with Lucy; and if it had, it would not have occurred to him that she could have been jealous.

When a man is quite innocent in his intentions, the idea that he could seem guilty in the eyes of others never suggests itself to him. The only reason he could assign for her refusal of him was the all-sufficient one that she did not love him. There was sorrow enough in this thought for him, but there was no bitterness. He would carry out his resolution, go back and finish the work, and then take himself off to those wilds in which the old familiar life of hardship and danger would help him to forget, or at least to overcome, his love for the mistress of Court Regna.

He and the captain dined together in the cabin. The captain, of course, saw that the young fellow who had volunteered as his mate was a gentleman, and in many little ways he made a kind of acknowledgment of the fact. Over the pipe and *glass of grog that almost invariably follow a skipper's meal* he *then dropped into conversation.*

"*Been long in these parts?*" he asked, one evening.

"No," said Gerald, "not very long. You, I suppose, know them well?"

"Born there," said the captain, jerking his head in the direction of Regna.

Gerald remarked that it was a pretty place, and the captain opined emphatically that it was the best place on earth.

"But that's natural, seein' that I was born there. I suppose you saw Court Regna?"

Gerald answered in the affirmative, and though he felt it would be far wiser to avoid the subject if he meant to recover his peace of mind, he said:

"You know it well, of course?"

The captain nodded, and smoked thoughtfully for a moment or two.

"Yes," he said, "man and boy. Great changes there lately; I heerd that the lord left all the property to the young lady as was livin' there?"

"That is so," said Gerald.

"He was a strange gentleman," remarked the captain, after another silence. "I was cabin boy, then first hand, and then mate, aboard his yacht."

"He kept a yacht?" said Gerald. "I had not heard of that."

"That's a long while ago," said the captain. "He didn't keep it here at Regna; it's a bad coast for yachting, uncertain-like, as you may say—one hour fine, the next howlin'. We used to put in at one of the safer ports further down the coast. His lordship was a good sailor, and could handle the yacht as neatly as any man in the Bristol Channel; and I never see him show the white feather—excepting once, and that was when we'd got the women aboard."

Gerald listened half absently.

"A party of yachting guests, I suppose?" he said.

The captain pushed his cap on to the back of his head, and stared at the floor, puffing musingly.

"No," he said, slowly, and as if he were struggling with his natural reticence; "if warn't a party. Lord Wharton liked to be alone on a sea-trip."

Something in the man's manner attracted Gerald's attention.

"What ladies were they, then?" he asked, rather to show his interest than from curiosity.

The captain still seemed to hesitate; but at last he said:

"Well, I'm not given to talking about my betters, but his lordship's dead, and it happened so long ago that it wor

make much odds one way or t'other. It was this way. One day his lordship come aboard, just below here, with one of the women servants of the Court. I've heerd tell that she'd been a long time in the Court service; one of the men, a Regna lad, said as how she was his lordship's nurse. I forget her name."

"Was it Burdon?" asked Gerald.

"That was it!" assented the captain. "You know her?"

"I have seen an old lady named Burdon at the Court," said Gerald.

"A very old woman, a bit gone in her mind?"

Gerald nodded.

"Yes, that's her," said the captain. "We sailed for a place called Lartree, on the Irish coast, and there his lordship and she went ashore. We had orders to lie off in the bay and wait for his lordship. It was late at night, and dark at that, when I, bein' watch, heerd the captain's gig rowing toward the yacht. I got a lantern and held it so as to light the ship's ladder; and you may guess I was a bit took aback when I see two women in the boat instead of one."

He had refilled his glass, and being well launched on his narrative, went on more freely:

"His lordship and this Mrs. Burdon had brought a young lady with them. She was a pretty young thing, though she was pale and scared like, and looked as if she'd been crying. She smiled and thanked me nicely as I helped her up the gang-way. His lordship took her on his arm down to the cabin, and 'most direckly afterward we had orders to set sail."

"A romantic incident!" said Gerald, deeply interested. "Do you know who she was, or how it happened that she accompanied Lord Wharton on the yacht?"

The captain shook his head.

"Never knew from that day to this," he said. "His lordship was a sort of close and reserved kind of gentleman, and kept aloof from the crew. We'd just see him and the young lady walking on the deck in the fine weather; and he treated her—well, just as a man treats his sweetheart or his wife."

"His wife?" said Gerald. "But Lord Wharton was never married, was he?"

The captain shook his head sententiously. "Can't say," he said. "I've heerd as he never was. We went down to the Mediterranean with a fair wind, and his lordship, and Mrs. Burdon, and the young lady went ashore. The next day we

had orders to go back to England, and we sailed without them."

"And you never saw the young lady again?" asked Gerald.

"No," said the captain. "I never see nor heard of her again. I don't know as I ever opened my mouth about the business afore this; and I don't know what made me talk about it now!" he added, as if half regretting his communicativeness.

"There is no harm done," said Gerald. "I shall not speak of it again."

The captain looked somewhat relieved. "Well, as I said, it happened a long while ago," he remarked; "and his lordship's dead and gone to answer for the business—if there was anything wrong in it!"

"You speak doubtfully," said Gerald.

"Well, you see," said the captain, slowly, "the young lady didn't seem like a light o' love. One can generally tell. And hers was a good face as well as a pretty one; besides, his lordship didn't treat her as a man treats a woman who's made a fool of herself for him."

"It is a strange story," said Gerald. "Do you think they know of it at Court Regna?"

"I don't know," said the captain; "but I feel pretty sure they don't. I've never heard any one speak of it, and it's not unlikely that the men on board kept their counsel as I did mine. We knew, though his lordship never said a word, that he didn't want it spoken of, and we'd too good places to run the risk of losing them."

"If she was his wife, why didn't he take her to Court Regna?" said Gerald.

"Can't say," said the captain, shrugging his shoulders, and rising, as if the subject were closed. "Better get on deck; I'm thinking we shall have a change o' weather."

There was so much romance in the captain's story that it remained in Gerald's mind for several hours. It struck him as strange that even here, in the open sea, Court Regna and its affairs had followed him; and he was conscious of a sentiment approaching pity for the unknown girl who had intrusted her fate to Lord Wharton.

However, as the night came on he had little time for dwelling upon the strange story. The captain's prognostication was verified. The wind swung round, after the charming but somewhat risky fashion of the Bristol Channel, and the "Susan" was soon rolling in the trough of a heavy sea.

Gerald and the rest of the crew were hard at work all night. The canvas had to be taken in, and the "Susan" was scudding with bare poles before a boisterous wind, which, before morning, grew into a perfect hurricane.

The storm and the labor it caused came as a welcome relief to Gerald, and as he clung to the shrouds, with the wind and rain beating pitilessly upon him, he found it almost possible to forget even Claire in the stress and strain of the dangerous duties which he had undertaken, and which he performed as earnestly and honestly as any other member of the crew.

Toward morning the wind subsided, but was followed by a thick fog, which was still more dangerous. They had lost a topmast during the night, and the vessel had been badly strained, and Gerald, as he made his way along the drenched and slippery deck, to ask a question of the captain, saw, by the expression of the weather-beaten face, that the skipper was not particularly satisfied with the condition of affairs. He smiled grimly as Gerald approached him, and clung to the taffrail.

"Not much of a pleasure trip, this!" he said. "I reckon you didn't calculate on so much weather and hard work when you came aboard sir?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Gerald, pleasantly. "It's not the first bad weather I've seen, or the first hard work. One must take it as it comes. Where are we?"

"Don't know exactly," said the captain, with a composure which struck Gerald as grimly humorous. "Off the coast of Ireland, I fancy. We shall see when this pea-soup lifts." And he nodded at that sailor's *bête noir*, the yellow fog. "Where ever we are, I shall have to put into port for repairs."

"I am sorry, for your sake," said Gerald; "but it doesn't matter so far as I am concerned. I am only out on a holiday."

Toward noon the fog lifted, and they made for one of the small bays on the south-east coast of Ireland. The captain knew the place, and informed Gerald that as the necessary repairs would take some days, he was free to spend them on land, remarking: "You bargained for a fair sail to France, not for floundering about the Irish coast. Take a week off, and if I can't get a man to take your place—or if you've a *mind to go on* with us—why, join at the end of that time."

Gerald accepted the offer, but would not go ashore until the vessel had been made as trim and ship-shape as possible; and he and the captain parted on most satisfactory terms.

"Here's your pay up to date, and as you've earned it like a man, I reckon you won't be too proud to take it."

Gerald accepted the money, frankly admitting that he needed it, and having shaken the captain by the hand, went ashore. As he walked through the little village which stood on the edge of the small bay, he asked himself what he should do next; whether, after all, he had acted wisely in leaving Regna, and whether it would not be better for him to end his engagement with the captain and go straight back to his work at the Court? But, in simple truth, he shrunk, with soreness of heart, from seeing Claire yet awhile.

The country behind the village was rough in the extreme, but rich in that beauty which is characteristic of Irish scenery. The hills that rose from the sea were thickly covered with pines, which made the air fragrant with terebene, as Gerald entered one of the woods. After walking for some time amidst the straight stems which rose like the columns of some stately cathedral, he came upon a wooden hut. Its solitude and the scenery by which it was surrounded reminded him of some of his backwoods experience.

"I wonder if I have forgotten how to use an ax?" he asked himself, with a smile, as he went up to the door of the hut. The woodman came out in answer to his summons, and Gerald stated his case frankly. The woodman, a sturdy young fellow, eyed Gerald pleasantly enough.

"You might get lodgings in the village," he said; "or you can stay here, if you like, shure, if it's not too tough for yer."

It was just what Gerald wanted. With true Irish hospitality, the young fellow prepared a meal at once. It consisted of the simplest fare, but the woodman did the honors with the rough grace and courtesy characteristic of his countrymen.

Gerald felt as if he were indeed in the backwoods again as he sat on a felled tree and talked with his host, while they smoked their pipes and sipped their tea. He slept soundly that night on a bed made of fir fiber covered with a rough rug, the fragrance of the couch fully compensating for any lack of softness. When he awoke in the morning his host had already gone off to work, and Gerald set about getting the breakfast. He felt as he was thus engaged that, if he had never met Claire Sartoris, he could have spent many a happy month in this delightful place. After breakfast he offered to help the young fellow with his work, and the man looked somewhat surprised.

"Shure, I thought ye were a gintleman!" he said. Gerald laughed. "The oldest gentleman of all was a gar-

dener," he said. "I know how to use an ax—if I've not forgotten it; and perhaps you'll give me a hint or two."

He worked with Terence, the woodman, as honestly as he had worked on board the "Susan," and on the second day, as they sat at their evening meal, Terence remarked that it was a pity Gerald should ever leave the forest.

On the evening of the fourth day they were engaged in felling a particularly large fir. They had cut through half of the trunk, when Gerald noticed that the guard rope, as it is called, had slipped below the place at which they had tied it.

He pointed this out to Terence, and climbed the tree to replace the rope in its proper position. He was fastening the last knot, when the woodman uttered a cry of warning. Gerald looked down to see what was the matter, and at the same moment felt the tree giving under him, and, before he could drop from his elevated position, the tall trunk fell with a crash to the ground. He was thrown some distance by the impetus, but thinking that nothing was amiss, attempted to rise. As he did so, a sharp pain shot through his leg, and he fell to the ground.

He knew in a moment what had happened, and when the woodman sprung to his side, he said, quietly:

"I've broken my leg."

Terence said nothing, but lugged Gerald up on to his back and carried him to the hut.

"It's broken, shure enough!" he said.

Gerald smiled mirthlessly. "I know—a broken leg—when I feel it," he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Can you set it?"

The woodman shook his head. "By good luck there's a dochter in the village," he said. "You kape quiet and I'll fetch him."

"I shall keep quiet enough, without a doubt," said Gerald, with a rueful laugh.

The woodman made him as comfortable as possible, and then started for the doctor. While he was gone, Gerald took a sheet of note-paper and envelope from his pocket-book and wrote a letter to Mr. Sapley, informing him of his accident, and promising to return immediately he was able to do so.

Terence returned with the doctor, the limb was set, and Gerald, half unconscious with pain as he was, had still intelligence enough remaining to beg the doctor to post the letter, and also to inform the captain of the "Susan" that he would be unable to sail with him.

Then he quietly and unostentatiously fainted.

Now, it happened that Gerald's penciled note was delivered during Mr. Sapley's absence from home. Mordaunt opened it, and as he read it, a thrill of satisfaction ran through him. That Fate should be playing into his hands in this extraordinary way, seemed to him an augury of his future success. He locked the door, and paced up and down for some time with the note in his hand, then he tore it into fragments, and, seating himself at the table, wrote the following answer:

"DEAR SIR,—I am extremely sorry to hear of the accident which has befallen you, and I trust that it will have no very serious consequences. Owing to unforeseen circumstances, Miss Sartoris has decided to discontinue the rebuilding of the wing at the Court. Lee, the builder, has been arranged with, and I beg to inclose a check, which I trust you will consider sufficient compensation for the work you have done."

He signed this with his father's name, and appended his father's signature to the check, and as he posted this letter with his own hand, felt as grateful to Providence as if he were the most upright and deserving of men.

Gerald Wayre completely out of his way, his path was clear!

CHAPTER XIX.

HAVING sent this letter and check, Mordaunt Sapley waited for a reply, which he knew would come. He counted upon Gerald's pride to play into his hands, and it is needless to say that he did not rely upon it in vain.

In a few days there came a short note from Gerald, saying that he regretted that Miss Sartoris had decided to discontinue the rebuilding, but that he had only to acquiesce in her decision. And he begged permission to return the check.

Mordaunt Sapley smiled as he burned both letter and check. Gerald had indeed played into his hands, for the pride that prompted the return of the draft would, Mordaunt felt sure, prevent Gerald's return.

His sudden departure puzzled Mordaunt a little; for, notwithstanding his explanation, he was conscious of a feeling that the desire for a holiday did not altogether and satisfactorily account for Gerald's flight. And Gerald had been so engrossed and evidently delighted with his work. Why had he gone?

As he could not answer the question, Mordaunt put it aside. He did not tell his father that he had heard from Gerald.

and old Sapley and the rest of Regna became fully convinced that Gerald had gone off with Lucy, as the days passed into weeks and the weeks into months without any tidings of the absent pair reaching Regna.

Claire, as a rule, avoided the old wing, but now and again she walked that way, and looked at it—as a woman looks at some inanimate object associated with the great and secret sorrow of her life. She recalled Gerald's face, his voice, the reverential and veiled tenderness of his eyes when they rested upon her. She lived over again that day when he had stood near the falling wall, and she had sprung forward to warn and rescue him. His stern words—hiding his anxiety on her account—rang in her ears. Like a canker in the heart of the rose, her love—her blighted love for him—was eating into her life.

She grew paler and thinner; and Mrs. Lexton, who noticed the alteration in her, insisted upon her taking some change.

They went up to London, and plunged into the mild course of dissipation permitted to ladies.

But Claire never entered a concert-room or a theater without looking round, half fearing, half hoping to see the stalwart form and handsome face which were rarely out of her mind. Though they did not go into "society," in the accepted sense of the word, some friends and connections of the family made Claire's acquaintance, and made haste to welcome the young girl, who was not only lovely and charming, but the mistress of Court Regna and a large fortune.

"You must come up for the next season—you must, indeed, my dear!" said one of these, a certain Lady Redmayne, an only lady, who was generally recognized as one of that little band called leaders of fashion. "You will make a great success, I am certain."

Claire smiled in the pensive, preoccupied way which had become habitual to her now.

"I don't know that I particularly want to be a success," she said.

Lady Redmayne's eyed her shrewdly.

"Every healthy-minded man or woman wants to be a success, my dear," she remarked, with good-natured cynicism.

"It is what we live for—we women, especially. You have been buried too long in that country place of yours. There is *nothing so bad* for the nerves and spirits as a long spell of the country; it is always your rustic who is melancholy and nervous. Too much quiet is bad for the body and the brain. You laugh!"

Claire had only smiled.

"Very well. But I am quite right. Take yourself, for instance. Look at that woman in the peacock-blue bonnet. That is Lady Mary Grantford. How old do you think she is? Looks like a girl, doesn't she? Did you hear her laugh? My dear, she is as old as I am; we were at school together. And it isn't only the *poudre de riz* and beautiful wig, and her eyebrow pencil, that keep her young—it is the bustle and stir of life. She hasn't had time to get old. And she will keep like that until one day she will wake up and find it is time to die."

"What an awful picture!" said Claire, with a faint shudder.

"Awful; yes. But I doubt whether it is much worse than yours," said Lady Redmayne. "Here are you, who have never had a trouble in your life—"

Claire's lips came together, and she winced.

"Who are rolling in money, have one of *the* places in England; who might become a power in the world, and—and—no, not end, but continue—by marrying a coronet; but 'instead of which,' as the magistrate said, here you are, as listless and uninterested, as 'outside' things as if you were that poor girl wheeling that perambulator."

"Perhaps she is happy enough—content," said Claire.

They were driving through Kensington Gardens, and the warmth of the winter's sun had brought out the nurse-maids.

"Not she!" said Lady Redmayne, with the coolness of the aristocrat. "How could a person of that class be content? But your case is different. My dear, take the advice of a woman who, having an absurd prejudice against powder and paint, must consider herself old, and *live*. I quite tremble when I think of what you are drifting into!"

"What is that—an old maid?" said Claire.

"No, my child, you are too young for such an awful fate as that to be thought of for the present; but into something almost as bad and hopeless—the melancholy young person who wears a black merino dress, and goes round 'slumming,' and visiting the poor, with a basket and a bundle of tracts."

"I sometimes go round Regna with the basket, if not the tracts," said Claire, with a smile.

"That's all very well—at Regna. It is part of your rôle, my dear—the Lady Bountiful, and all that—but I'm thinking of the professional London district visitor."

Claire laughed.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "I have neither sufficient courage nor unselfishness for that."

"I am delighted to hear it," said Lady Redmayne.

devoutly. "I hope you are not offended by my candor, my dear?" she added.

"No; I am grateful," said Claire, simply. "It is very good of you to take any interest in me."

"Which means, 'Thank you for your advice, which I don't mean to follow'?" remarked Lady Redmayne, shrewdly.

Claire colored faintly.

"I will see," she said, quietly.

That same evening she and Mrs. Lexton dined out, and as she entered the room, Lady Redmayne, who was of the party, saw that Claire had discarded black from her dress, and wore a costume which, if simple—for bright colors and elaborate costumes were not to Claire's taste—was both rich and elegant. And the old lady nodded and smiled on her approvingly.

Claire attracted a good deal of attention, and, in the drawing-room, after dinner, the men were gathered round her in that significant accord which indicates that their interest and admiration have been aroused.

Though it was the "off season," Parliament was sitting, and there were enough people in town to provide for Claire that foretaste of success which Lady Redmayne had prophesied. When Claire rode in the park she had no lack of attendant cavaliers; and when she appeared in Lady Redmayne's box at the winter opera, men dropped in noiselessly, and stood at the back of Claire's chair, eager for a word, or, better still, a smile.

Claire was gracious to all of them. To the young boy peer—Lord Charmly—who was madly in love with her, and declared his love in public and private—to the mature statesman—Sir William Grantly—who paid the mistress of Court Regna the grave attentions characteristic of so famous a man. Claire was gracious to them all; but neither the boy's fervent adoration nor the statesman's serious devotion touched her heart.

Sometimes she felt as if her heart were dead; as if it had been robbed of life and the capacity for love on the night she had seen Lucy Hawker on Gerald Wayre's breast. And when the thought struck her, a flush would rise to her face, and her hands would clench; that she, Claire Sartoris, should be so *poor a thing as to think of a man who had left her side—with his love vows warm upon his lips—to fly with another woman—a girl from her own village, almost one of her* *vants!*

Lady Redmayne's worldly wise advice bore fruit. When

Claire and Mrs. Lexton returned to the Court, the worn and weary expression had almost disappeared from Claire's face, and she seemed very nearly her old self. But as the carriage passed by the half-demolished wing, she averted her eyes, as if she were not even yet strong enough to look upon it unmoved.

They had scarcely settled down, when the county families began to call. Lord Chester was the first, and the others followed suit. A few months ago Claire would have said, "Not at home!" and contented herself by merely returning their cards; but, in Lady Redmayne's words, she was now determined to *live*. The county people saw and were seen, and were delighted with her. Invitations to dinner came pell-mell, and Claire accepted them. Her appearance at the first of these parties created as much of a sensation as was permissible at such a solemn function as a county dinner. She looked superb, and the effect of her clear, ivory face and violet eyes, with their half-sad, half-dreamy light, was heightened by contrast with the brilliant color and rather florid style of beauty of the other women. She looked like a Grecian statue in the midst of a gayly colored flower-garden.

The women eyed her curiously and with reluctant admiration, and the men, metaphorically, fell at her feet at once.

It was a large party. Lord Chester took Claire in to dinner, and was evidently delighted at having her under his wing. He had called at the Court several times since Claire's return, and he treated her as if they were quite old friends.

"It is a large party," he said, raising his *pince-nez*; "but not so large as those you are accustomed to in London, Miss Sartoris. I like a large party; it is more cheerful, don't you think? And people are not so likely to drift into gossip and politics—which I hate. By the way, isn't that Mr. Mordaunt Sapley down there, at the end of the table?"

Claire looked. It was indeed that gentleman. Perhaps the surprise she felt at seeing him at a county dinner-party showed itself in her face, for Lord Chester smiled as he balanced his soup-spoon.

"A clever young fellow!" he said. "I am very glad to meet him, for I want to ask his advice about some land I have on my hands. Rather calculating of me, you are thinking! An expressive face is not always an advantage to its owner, Miss Sartoris," he added, with a laugh.

"I am sure Mr. Sapley will be glad to help you," said Claire.

She looked down the table again at Mordaunt, and noticed

a change in him. He seemed to have grown older and graver, and Claire, whose eyes were like the eagle's, thought that she noticed some threads of gray in the hair on his temples. It seemed improbable in a man so young; but if she were mistaken in the gray hairs, there could be no mistake in the lines which had suddenly become graven in his face, and which revealed themselves quite plainly. She noticed that he wore no jewelry of any kind, and that in place of the old conceited, self-satisfied expression, his face wore a look of set gravity.

"Mr. Mordaunt Sapley has become quite a celebrity of late—but of course you know," remarked Lord Chester.

"No," said Claire. "I have been away some months."

"I thought you might have heard. Old Sapley—I beg his pardon!" He laughed. "He is generally called 'Old Sapley,' has almost entirely given up business now, and his son has stepped into his place, and I imagine makes a very worthy successor."

"Has Mr. Sapley been ill?" Claire asked.

"I don't think so; though I fancy I have heard he has been ailing lately. He is getting on in years, you know."

"He appeared quite well and strong when I left," said Claire. "But I remember that Mr. Mordaunt transacted business for him."

"Perhaps he felt that it would be a good thing for the young fellow to have some responsibility," remarked Lord Chester, "and it appears to have worked very well, for I hear that Mr. Mordaunt has very much improved; in fact, that he has become quite a 'changed man.'"

"And in what way is he famous?" asked Claire.

Lord Chester laughed.

"Oh, I only used the phrase in a limited and local sense. He has shown a great interest in politics lately, and has taken rather a prominent part in local affairs. They say that he started the idea of the new hospital at Thraxton; it is certain that though he did not head the subscriptions, he planked down the largest check."

Claire was surprised. She knew that Mr. Sapley, the father, had never erred on the side of liberality.

"Then there was the matter of the hounds," continued Lord Chester. "You may have heard that our host, Lord Wraybrough threatened to give up the mastership because of the lack of subscriptions?"

"Yes, I saw it in the papers."

"Well, we were all in despair, and had given up the

hounds for lost, when young Sapley came forward and offered to guarantee the deficiency. Of course, it must have been with his father's money, but we all know it was Mr. Mordaunt's doing."

He glanced approvingly—and yet curiously—at the preternaturally grave face at the other end of the table. "And he did it very modestly, too. Most young men coming forward in that way would have done so with the object of filling the mastership, but Mr. Mordaunt stipulated that Lord Wraybrough should retain it. Then there was another matter—a small matter, but one that has won golden opinions for Mr. Mordaunt amongst the people—but they are your people, Miss Sartoris, and you will have heard of it, no doubt?"

"I don't think so. What is it?" Claire asked.

"Old Captain Hawker at Regna—he has had some trouble lately," Lord Chester went on quickly and delicately, "and the poor old man was broken down. They say he isn't likely to live. A case of broken heart, if ever there was one."

The hand with which Claire raised her wine-glass trembled.

"Oh, I am sorry—sorry," she murmured, almost inaudibly.

"Yes, yes!" said Lord Chester, quickly. "Poor old fellow! I went to see him yesterday, and I am afraid that he is breaking up."

"I will go and see him to-morrow," said Claire, with a little catch in her voice. "And what is it that Mr. Mordaunt has done?"

"He has given the old man a pension, quite a liberal pension—but I beg your pardon a thousand times! Perhaps it comes from you, and Mr. Mordaunt was only your agent."

Claire looked away, her brows drawn straight.

"No," she said, her voice sounding cold and proud, as it always did when she was much moved. "I did not know Captain Hawker was ill."

Lord Chester saw that she was distressed or annoyed, and hastened away from the subject. "It is whispered that Mr. Mordaunt Sapley may probably stand for the county at the general election, and 'pon my word, I shouldn't be surprised if he were returned!"

"Mr. Mordaunt Sapley, a member of Parliament!" Claire exclaimed, involuntarily. She remembered the father creeping about the Court in Lord Wharton's time, remembered Mordaunt as he was, only recently, vain, affected, self-conceited; *it sounded incredible, ridiculous, to her.*

Lord Chester laughed as if he enjoyed her naïve astonishment.

"Ah, my dear Miss Sartoris, we live in democratic times! Nothing nowadays surprises me; certainly not the sudden rise of any man. Why, think of the kind of person we send to the House! Though it's true Mr. Mordaunt would be a county member, and we have always sent one of our own people."

He used the phrase quite simply, and without a suspicion of vulgar pride or insolence.

"But the old order changes, you know. And, really, come to consider it, I'm not sure that Mr. Mordaunt wouldn't make a capital member. Anyway, he would be better than our present man, poor old Barkly, who has never opened his mouth in the House—except to snore. At any rate, Mr. Mordaunt is *here*"—he looked round him significantly—"and," he laughed again, "one ought not to be surprised at anything that follows."

There was a pause for a moment, then he added, candidly:

"I am afraid you will think the last remark in rather bad taste; and it *was*. But what I meant was, that a short time ago Mr. Mordaunt Sapley would not have had an invitation from Lord Wraybrough."

"I understand," said Claire.

"But times are changing; for the better—perhaps"—the old aristocrat and his prejudices peeped out in the pause, and the doubtful accent of the "perhaps." "We want young blood. Mr. Mordaunt Sapley is young, undeniably clever and rich—or will be."

"Will he?" said Claire, absently.

Lord Chester smiled.

"I should say that Mr. Sapley was one of the richest men in the county," he replied. "How he got it—" he shrugged his shoulders and wrinkled his face ruefully. "Ah, well, one man's loss is another man's gain. We all know how men like old Sapley amass their wealth. It is the old story of the ivy and the oak. The ivy flourishes, the oak dies. But really I must have bored you to death with Mr. Sapley and his works. Did you go and see Irving and Miss Terry while you were in town?"

The dinner dragged its slow length along, but at last came to a conclusion, and the ladies left the gentlemen to their claret. Mordaunt leaned back in his chair and drew an *inaudible* breath of relief.

Every time Claire had glanced his way he had felt the calm, violet eyes upon him. It seemed to him as if she had read his secret; not only the awful secret of his crime, but that hidden

ambition, which, sown in his breast by his father, had now grown into a stalwart plant under whose spreading leaves the course of his life was stealthily working its way.

He was incapable of love, but, mingled with his feverish craving for place and power, was that base substitute for love which is all such a man can feel. Claire's beauty, her indescribable grace and charm, made his heart beat with ambition and desire; ambition to become the master of Court Regna, desire to gain the loveliest woman he had ever seen.

One moment his heart quailed before the difficulties which her beauty and her pride presented, the next, he rose to a kind of sullen and dogged resolution. Who could say that he would not win? What had he not achieved already! Here he was, a guest at the table of one of the most exclusive of the county families; he had gained his footing, he would take care to strengthen it day by day, until there should be no outcry of surprise when he took the last great step.

And he did not play his part badly. He had changed wonderfully; the father's shrewdness and cleverness had cropped up in him, and aided by a better education and knowledge of the world, bore him along.

In the matter of the hospital and the hounds he had been careful not to push himself forward, but had assumed a modesty so well as to deceive everybody, even these great folk who naturally regarded him with suspicion.

The invitation to the Wraybroughs' dinner-party marked a step in his career, and he was careful how he behaved. Though quiet and reserved, he did not make the mistake, too frequently committed by the "new man," of being timid and nervously deferential. He only spoke when there was occasion, and spoke modestly, but with quiet self-possession, and something like dignity, as if he wished to intimate that he was quite conscious of the novelty of his position, but was not overwhelmed by the honor it conferred upon him.

Lord Wraybrough was not only grateful to him for saving the hounds, but was rather taken with the young fellow who had come forward so quietly and taken a part in the public affairs of the county. Now that he had thrown off his foolish Oxford affectations, there was not so very much the matter with Mordaunt's manners, and the gravity, unusual in so young a man, was rather taking.

Lord Wraybrough, already prepossessed in his favor, almost liked him—almost; for there was something indefinable in the not bad-looking face, which, so to speak, put

people on their guard—and, when the ladies had left, he took care to draw Mordaunt into the conversation.

An alteration in the game laws came under discussion, and Mordaunt, who had luckily been "reading up" the proposed bill, talked about it sensibly, and the rest of the men listened with the well-bred, unaffected attention of their class.

Lord Chester—perhaps remembering his conversation with Claire—remarked, with a smile:

"You have stated the case very clearly, Mr. Sapley"—he could not have omitted the "Mr." if his life had depended upon it, but Mordaunt, though he winced inwardly, showed no outward sign—"and I quite agree with you. With you, I can't see how it would benefit the workingman to throw open the preserves to every man who chose to take out a game license."

"Dash it all, no! I should think not!" exclaimed one of the county squires. "If there were no game there would be no keepers, no shooting to let, no shooting-tenant to spend money. I'm getting rather tired of the 'workingman' cry, and I should like to see something done for the poor gentlemen."

"That will come when we are quite ruined, Heathcote," remarked Lord Wraybrough, laconically.

"The workingman has the power now," said his brother, the rector, holding his glass up to the light, and sighing.

"Educate him," said Mordaunt, quietly. "Teach him to see where his true interests lie, and he will use the power wisely."

"By gad, you're right, sir," said Heathcote, staring at him with a kind of bovine surprise and approval. "You seem to know how the case stands."

"You ought to go into the House, Mr. Sapley," remarked Lord Chester.

For the first time Mordaunt's pale face flushed, but the flush did not last longer than a moment, and his small eyes—wonderfully like his father's now, shot a glance round the table, then sunk modestly.

"Thank you, Lord Chester; but there are others who have a prior claim to that honor, to say nothing of greater ability."

The latter part of the speech jarred somehow, and was followed by a silence which was broken by Lord Wraybrough.

"I don't know," he said, thoughtfully, but with a smile.

"Some one will have to be found to fill Barkly's place; he tells me he will not stand again."

"Then Mr. Sapley had better think of it," said Lord

Chester. The others looked at Mordaunt reflectively, and said nothing. He understood the look, but sat unmoved; but he wished that Claire were present.

"Now that we have started politics, the only way of stopping us will be to join the ladies," said Lord Wraybrough; and he led the way into the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XX.

MORDAUNT did not at once go to Claire, but moved about the room, talking to the ladies whose acquaintance he had made. Women are less exclusive toward men than to members of their own sex; and Mordaunt always found that he got on better with them than the masculine portion of the county families. He had picked up some knowledge of art and literature at Oxford—at any rate, he had acquired some of the jargon—and compared with the county squires, whose conversation was limited to sporting topics, the ladies found Mr. Mordaunt quite entertaining.

Some daring spirit had suggested a bazaar in aid of some of the local charities, and Mordaunt entered into the idea at once, and promised his assistance, both pecuniary and personal, and, before he had left the group, had succeeded in making a favorable impression.

"I think him an extremely nice young man," remarked Mrs. Heathcote. "So intelligent and well-informed."

"And he is always so gentlemanly," said Mrs. Lexton. "We see a great deal of him at the Court, of course."

"Ah, yes; one almost forgets that he is the son of Mr. Sapley, Miss Sartoris's agent," remarked Lady Wraybrough. "It is quite extraordinary the difference between them. It is wonderful what a university education will do."

"And he is so good-natured, too," said the lady with the bazaar on the brain. "He entered into our plans at once, and seemed so ready to assist."

"Oh, Mr. Mordaunt Sapley is the coming man, without doubt," said Lady Wraybrough, with a faint smile.

Meanwhile, Mordaunt had made his way to Claire. He did not make the mistake of seating himself beside her, but stood, slightly bending forward.

"This is my first opportunity of welcoming you home, Miss Sartoris," he said, with a grave voice, in which deference was *very neatly suggested*. "I thought of coming up to the Court *some days ago*, but deemed it better not to trouble you with *business immediately after your return*."

Claire glanced at him rather coldly. She was still annoyed at his action in the matter of old Hawker.

"Thanks," she said. "But I should have been quite ready to see to anything." Then, in her straightforward way, she said, looking at him with the direct regard of her violet eyes, "I am sorry you did not write and tell me of Captain Hawker's illness, Mr. Mordaunt."

He did not flush angrily, as he would have done a few months ago, but he lowered his eyes, and looked at the embroidered stool upon which one of her small feet, in its dainty satin shoe, rested.

"Ought I to have written to you?" he said. "I did think of doing so, but it seemed to me that I should only distress you without sufficient excuse."

"I should have been glad to—to have helped him," said Claire, looking straight before her.

"I was so sure of that, that I ventured to act in your behalf, in your name," he said, "and I have allowed the poor old man a pension. I trust I have not been guilty of presumption. I feel now that I ought to have written and asked your consent, but, as I have said, I was anxious to spare you any distress and worry."

Claire's face flushed, and she raised her eyes to his.

"The pension comes from *me*, then?" she said.

"Certainly," he assented, with an air of surprise at her question. "It will be paid out of the estate. Captain Hawker quite understands that, I believe, and all who know of it. Have I presumed too far? I acted on the spur of the moment, I must confess, but I felt convinced that I should have your approval. Perhaps I ventured—intruded—"

In the moment of reaction Claire felt quite penitent for having misjudged him.

"No, no!" she said, quickly, and with the flush deepening on her face, "you acted quite right, and—and I am very much obliged to you. It is just what I would have wished done."

He looked relieved, even grateful.

"I am very glad of your approval, Miss Sartoris," he said.

"I must confess that I have been rather uneasy, fearing that I had gone beyond my prerogative. I am afraid that poor Captain Hawker will not live long to enjoy your bounty. Nothing has been heard of his daughter."

He spoke the last sentence after a pause of a second or two, and with his eyes fixed on the footstool. "Or of Mr. Wyre," he added. Then he went on quickly: "You will

notice that Lee has cleared up the *débris* very carefully, and that the end of the wing has been built up—roughly, of course, but still sufficiently to fill it in and make it sightly. It will be soon overgrown by the creepers, which I have had trained over the new work.”

“Thank you,” said Claire. As she spoke, it seemed to her that there was always something for which she had to thank Mr. Mordaunt Sapley.

“Shall you be at home to-morrow morning?” he went on. “I should be glad to see you about the schools. They are in a very bad condition, and I fear that they will need rebuilding—or, at any rate, considerable repairs. I learn from my father that Lord Wharton always considered himself responsible for them—”

“Yes,” she said, promptly. “Whatever is necessary must be done. I will be at home to-morrow morning.”

He inclined his head.

“I hope you had a pleasant time in London?”

“Yes, very,” said Claire; and she found herself, for the first time in her life, talking about London, the concerts, the theaters, and parties, with Mr. Mordaunt Sapley, as if—as if he were her equal and a friend! Even at the moment it struck her as extraordinary.

He was too wise to monopolize her—he knew that the other men were anxious to talk with her, and were eying him askance—and presently he moved away.

At a county dinner-party the dinner itself is the principal part of the function; many of the guests have long distances to drive, and the evening ends early. To the last, Claire was surrounded by the men, who made no secret of their admiration and the spell which her beauty and the singular charm of her rather reserved manner cast upon them.

Mordaunt heard her carriage announced, and though he left it to Lord Wraybrough to conduct her to it, he stood near, as if in attendance, and ready to close the door, or receive a last word from her—was he not her steward, agent? He stood a moment looking after the carriage, which, in its richness and completeness of appointments, surpassed any other in the county. The horses were a superb pair, perfectly matched; the liveries were rich and always in good condition. The whole equipage indicated the wealth of the mistress of Court Regna.

His own dog-cart—he was too cautious to start a brougham yet—came up; and that, in its way, was as complete a turnout as the Court Regna chariot. It was just what a wealthy

bachelor's should be—not fine or gaudy, but costly and well-appointed, from the serviceable sixteen-hand horse to the neatly liveried groom.

Lord Wraybrough looked at it critically.

“Nice turn-out that of yours, Mr. Sapley,” he said. “Where did you get that horse? Looks like a Yorkshire-man!”

“He is Irish,” said Mordaunt.

“Ah, yes; now I look at him again! A hundred guineas there,” he added in a friendly way.

“A hundred and twenty,” said Mordaunt, modestly. “It is more than I intended to give, but I only keep two, and—”

Lord Wraybrough laughed and nodded.

“A good horse is always cheap,” he said.

Mordaunt drove homeward. It was a fine night, and he was feeling that inward glow of satisfaction which your schemer always experiences when his schemes are going right. He was satisfied—more than satisfied—with the evening's work. He had dined at Wraybrough Hall, had been treated as an equal; and Miss Sartoris had been a fellow-guest and witness of his triumph! And he had scored in the matter of old Hawker's pension—yes, he ought to be satisfied! What about the county seat? Would it be wise or not to put himself forward? As he pictured himself “Member for the N. W. Division of Downshire,” his face flushed; but a moment afterward it went pale again, paler even than usual—for a man had stepped from the hill to the road-side, and Mordaunt recognized Jenks, the coastguard.

He never saw the man without being reminded of Lucy—of that awful something lying buried at the foot of the cliff—without a spasm shooting through him; and the spasm filled him with rage as well as fear, for he told himself that the latter was groundless.

“Well, Jenks,” he said, pulling up the high-spirited horse, and forcing himself to speak pleasantly and carelessly, “fine night?”

“Yes, sir, grand weather. Have you such a thing—”

Mordaunt laughed rather discordantly, and tossed him a cigar.

“I know your formula, what you want, without asking now, you see, Jenks!” he said. “Good-night,” and he *drove on*.

When he reached home he entered the dining-room. It had become changed for the better, like Mordaunt, and deserved

a more dignified name than parlor. He mixed himself some soda and whisky, but only a small glass, and inquired of the neat waiting-maid—there were proper servants in the house now—whether his father was in bed, and being told that he was in the library—for so Mr. Sapley's den, redecorated and furnished, was now called—Mordaunt went to him.

Old Sapley was sitting in a stiff-backed arm-chair by the fire. He had altered, like the house, but in a different direction. He had grown thinner; the huge bones in his face stood out gauntly, with dark shadows on the sallow skin; the heavy brows had fallen over the cavernous eyes; his clothes hung upon him loosely, accentuating the gaunt frame. He had changed in a manner as well as in appearance. A kind of stupor seemed to have fallen upon him, and though his brain seemed as acute as ever, his voice had become lower, and his manner preoccupied and absent. He had allowed the practice, with all its ramifications, to drop almost entirely into Mordaunt's hands, and he rarely saw any clients or appeared in public. But the most marked change was that displayed in his manner to Mordaunt. It was as if he had grown to fear his son. It is certain that he never opposed him, not even when Mordaunt launched out into an expenditure which must have seemed prodigal to the narrower mind of the older man.

He would sit for hours, silently staring at the fire, only now and then glancing at Mordaunt. And there was something strange and curious in that glance. It was as if the old man were perpetually asking himself a question in which Mordaunt was concerned, and as if he dreaded the answer, which as perpetually eluded him. He had seen with keen eyes the change that had come over Mordaunt, and noted the rapid—the extraordinarily rapid—progress he was making; but it seemed that, if he had not actually lost all interest in the ambitious schemes which he himself had started, he had suddenly become content to step aside, to efface himself, and play the part of a spectator.

He looked up now, as Mordaunt entered, with the strange question in his eyes, and immediately lowered them to the fire again, as he said:

"Well, Mordaunt? Got back? Had a pleasant evening?"

"Yes, yes!" said Mordaunt, with an air of subdued triumph, "remarkably so."

He began to give a list of the guests, which embraced some members of almost all the county families; and as the old man listened, he nodded his huge head, and twisted his thin lips into a smile.

"Ay, a fine party!" he said. "And they—they're civil, Mordaunt, eh?"

Mordaunt flushed.

"Civil! of course. They were not likely to be anything else. They were gentlefolks."

"Ah! of course, of course! And some of them had cause to be civil! Heathcote!" He glanced at a tin box bearing the inscription, "Heathcote Estate." "Some of them remembered where their deeds were, eh, Mordy?"

Mordaunt shot an angry glance at him.

"I don't imagine they thought of anything of the kind," he said, coldly.

"Perhaps not, perhaps not!" assented the father, deprecatingly. "Why shouldn't you go among them? You're a gentleman, as much—almost as much—as they are; though your father did sweep out—"

"Had you not better go to bed? It is late," interrupted Mordaunt.

The old man obediently raised himself by the arms of the chair, and then sunk down again.

"In a minute or two, Mordy," he said, almost meekly. "Tell me some more about it. Was *she* there?"

"She" always stood for Miss Sartoris.

"Yes," said Mordaunt, "Miss Sartoris was there."

"And she saw you amongst them—saw that you were quite one of them, eh? That's good—that's good! We are getting on, Mordy! Lord, who'd have thought that a son of mine would have ruffled it amongst the best of them? And you can, Mordy, you can! I question if any of them can show a longer purse than you can."

"Money isn't everything," said Mordaunt, with a frown, as he opened his dispatch-case and began to examine some papers.

He worked hard now, and with a feverish eagerness which indicated that incessant work brought him some relief. It prevented useless brooding over the past.

"Pretty nearly," said old Sapley, with a timid kind of chuckle. "Money is power—"

"There is some talk of my standing for the county," Mordaunt broke in, slowly.

Old Sapley turned in his chair with an exclamation of astonishment and exultation.

"Well, why not—why not?" he said. "You'll find money useful there, Mordy. Member for Downshire—Mordaunt Sapley, Esq., M. P. for Downshire." Ah! He opened his

lips, and drew a long breath. "The best of them would have to receive you then, Mordy—even *she*! Yes. Stand, Mordy, stand! A Conservative, of course. But it's risky!" He added the word suddenly, and his face fell.

Mordaunt looked at him impatiently.

"Risky—what do you mean?"

The old man stared at the fire.

"A man wants clean hands and an open past," he muttered, as if to himself. "They ask questions, rake up old scandals—"

The lines seemed to deepen on Mordaunt's face.

"What are you talking about?" he said. "What cause have we to fear any raking up of the past? If we sprung from nothing we rose honestly—"

"Yes, yes," assented old Sapley, with timid eagerness, but still staring at the fire. "Yes, you've nothing to fear, Mordy, eh?" And for a moment he glanced at Mordaunt with the curious question in his eyes.

"Nothing!" said Mordaunt, emphatically; but as he spoke, his eyes dropped, and the hand that held the pen shook. "My past is clean enough. *You* may have had to do things in the course of your profession—"

Old Sapley shook his head.

"They won't trouble about that, Mordy. No one asks where you got your money—while you've got it still, and are spending it—"

"And it will have to be spent," said Mordaunt, as if glad to get away from the former subject. "I shall want to make a heavy draw upon the current account this week. Is there enough? If not, we must pay in."

"There's enough, I think," said the old man, with a sigh, which he promptly stifled. Though he saw the wisdom of this large expenditure, he felt it keenly.

"I have been thinking," said Mordaunt, after a pause, "that it would be as well if we bought a larger house, with some ground." He looked across the room. "This place is small and insignificant. It did very well until lately. The Grange is in the market."

"You won't want it. You won't want two large houses in the county, Mordaunt?" said old Sapley.

"Two? What do you mean?"

"I mean the Court, of course," said his father.

Mordaunt flushed, and shut his lips tightly.

"*You are counting your chickens before they are hatched,*" he said. "*Court Regna is not mine yet—and may never be*"

You seem to think—you have hinted once or twice—that it will be quite an easy matter for me to secure Miss Sartoris for a wife. You are mistaken."

The old man rose heavily, and looked at Mordaunt, his mouth screwed into a strange smile.

"You haven't asked her yet?" he said.

Mordaunt smiled at the question.

"Certainly not!" he said.

"Do so—do so!" exclaimed the old man. "Why should you wait? Ask her, Mordaunt—"

"And be refused—laughed at—for my pains!" said Mordaunt, with a sneer.

The old man laughed hoarsely; then his brows worked up and down.

"Refused! I'm not so certain. Ask her, Mordy; and if she refuses—why, come to me!"

He moved to the door, his head sunk, his lips moving, and Mordaunt, watching him, heard him mutter, with a threatening growl:

"Refuse! Refuse! She dare not!"

CHAPTER XXI.

Two days after the dinner-party at the Wraybroughs', Claire was sitting over her afternoon tea. She had been for a long ride and had not waited to change her habit for a tea-gown. She was alone, for Mrs. Lexton had gone off to London to nurse a sick friend. Whenever any of Mrs. Lexton's friends broke their limbs or got very bad, they immediately sent for her as a matter of course, and equally, as a matter of course, she hurried to the sufferer. There are some women like that, women to whom we fly in time of trouble, not because they are particularly strong-minded, but because we are sure of their sympathy; and when trouble is around, it is more often sympathy than assistance that we need. Job felt this; and modern "friends" are requested to make a note of it. It is not always the full purse, or the strong arm, or the wise advice that is most required, but that tender sympathy that is as precious balm to the wounded heart or aching head.

Claire sat with her feet on the fender and sipped her tea, and felt rather lonely; the veil of sadness and melancholy which had fallen on her young life, though it was often lifted when she was in society or in the middle of a long gallop, usually descended when she was alone. As she gazed dreamily

in the fire, she fell to musing upon Gerald Wayre and his strange conduct. The strangeness, the mystery of it, had not become lessened as the months had glided on, and sometimes to her—this afternoon, for instance—there seemed something so extraordinary in his behavior that she found it well-nigh incredible.

She allowed her mind to dwell upon him for some minutes, then with a faint flush of shame set down the tea-cup and rose suddenly, reproaching herself for thinking of a man who was not only unworthy of her, but the husband of another woman.

As she passed the window she saw a horseman riding up the avenue. It was Lord Chester, and she stood half unconsciously admiring his upright figure, and the refined, clear-cut features. She had grown to regard Lord Chester as a friend, and her spirits rose at the sight of the cheery face with its bright eyes and kindly smile.

"I am in luck," he said, as he entered and bent over her hand with that old-world manner which must be at once the admiration and despair of the young men of the present day. "It is so fine that I scarcely hoped to find you in!"

"That sounds rather like one of those things better left unsaid!" said Claire, with a smile. "Come to the fire, and I will give you some tea."

She rang for fresh tea, and Lord Chester sunk into a saddle-bag chair—and still, wonderful to say, looked graceful and distinguished.

"You are all alone?" he said, as he watched her fill his cup, and noted with pleasure the delicate hands, the graceful turn of the wrist.

Claire explained Mrs. Lexton's absence.

"She is the sick nurse and comforter in general, not only of her own family, but all her friends," she said. "Whenever anything is the matter, it is 'Send for Mary!' at once. I am surprised I have been able to keep her so long."

"It sounds selfish, but I am very glad you are alone," he said.

Claire raised her brows and looked at him with a smile.

"You are so rarely selfish that I readily forgive you, Lord Chester," she said.

"And yet I am going to prove to you how selfish I can be!" he said.

There was a gravity in his voice and manner as he bent forward, with his arms resting on his knees, his long, white hands clasped, that struck Claire as unusual, but she was still unconscious, and the smile was still on her lips as she retorted.

"Have you come to propose something pleasant? I notice that you always apologize when you are planning an agreeable outing or impromptu party."

He looked at the fire and then back at her. Her complete unconsciousness of his purpose somewhat embarrassed him. Did he seem in her eyes so old as to render any thought of his falling in love with her an impossibility?

"What is it?" she asked as he remained silent. "Have you been doing anything particularly wicked? If so, we must send for Mary Lexton, for she is the accepted confidant and sympathizer with all wrong-doers. Come, you are not afraid of me, Lord Chester!" and she laughed softly.

"Yes, it is because I am afraid," he said, smiling a little, but very gravely. "Miss Sartoris, I have ridden over to ask you a question upon the answer of which depends so much to me that I almost shrink from putting the question."

The smile vanished from Claire's face, and she looked at him with faint surprise.

"Tell me, first," he said, after a pause, "do you consider me a very old man?"

Claire's surprise increased.

"No," she said, candidly. "Indeed, as you rode up just now—" she paused.

"Please go on!" he said, earnestly.

"Well, I was thinking how young you looked."

His face brightened, then he laughed deprecatingly. "I am at my best in the saddle," he said, modestly; "but I am glad, very glad, to hear that you don't regard me as an antique! I must confess that I do not feel that I am an old man; sometimes I forget that I am not quite a young one. Miss Sartoris, I do not know whether any of our good gossips have told you the story of my life—if so commonplace a life can be said to have a story."

"No," said Claire. She was still far from guessing whither his singular words were tending.

"It is told in a sentence or two," he went on, continuing to look at her with a faint smile, but with a slight compression of the lips. "When I was really a young man I fell in love. I was very young, and my cousin—the late earl—and my elder brother, were alive. Young and poor, and with no prospect of the title, I was bold enough to avow my love.

And I was accepted."

Claire nodded sympathetically. It was almost as if she had said, "I am not surprised!" and he looked at her gratefully he went on:

"The course of true love never runs smoothly—ours ran very roughly. She was very beautiful," he paused. "Her people were ambitious for her, and considered her mad to throw herself away on the younger son of a younger son. She stood firm at first—at first," he paused. "Then there came a noble and wealthy suitor upon the scene. He was an older man than I—a man of the world in every sense of the word, and notwithstanding our engagement, he wooed her with every art which a man can bring to bear. And in the end—he won."

He paused and looked at the fire for a moment, then back at Claire with a smile, as if to show her that there was now neither regret nor bitterness in his heart.

"Her people brought pressure to bear—pressure applied day and night, week in and week out. You, a woman, can perhaps understand better than a man what that means. She yielded, and accepted Lord Wharton."

"Lord Wharton!" Claire exclaimed in a low voice. "But—but Lord Wharton was never married!"

He inclined his head. "I did not intend to mention his name, but it escaped me unawares," he said. "Yes, it was Lord Wharton. But you are right. He never married. He was an extraordinary man—you knew him better than any of us—can perhaps understand how, having got what he wanted, he quickly wearied of it, and ceased to value it. He did not marry the girl he had robbed me of. One day he sailed in his yacht—for Ireland, I think; on his return, after an absence of a few weeks, he went to her and told her almost bluntly the—well, that he had changed his mind. In short, he jilted her as—she had jilted me. He gave no reason—there was another woman in the case, doubtless."

"It was poetical justice," Claire said in a low voice. "You do not expect me to be sorry for her! But, Lord Wharton—I have never heard anything of this, Lord Chester!"

He smiled.

"He was scarcely the man to speak of anything that did not redound to his credit," he said. "He paid the penalty. There was dueling in those days—ah, you see, now, how old I am—and he stood up and received the fire of the girl's brother, and was wounded in the arm. The family honor was satisfied, and there was an end of it."

"And of her?"

"She died a few years later," he said, quietly. "And now you are asking yourself why I have told you this, the only eventful incident in my life. Can you not guess? When

was jilted, Miss Sartoris, I said that I had done with your sex forever. I have kept my vow for a longer period than most men keep their vows, and I should keep it still—if I had not met you.”

Claire almost started.

“It’s only lately, since I have seen so much of you, that I have discovered that though my hair is white my heart is green, as the Irish say. I have told you my story, the reason of my long bachelorhood, because I have come this morning to offer you my heart and hand.”

Claire tried to speak, to stop him saying any more, but he went on, quickly:

“Do not think that I forget the difference in our ages. I have thought of it unceasingly, ever since I found that I loved you. But, Miss Sartoris, a man’s love is not to be estimated by his tale of years. There is no young man whom you and I know who could love you more ardently, more devotedly than I do. With a young man, love is of his life a thing apart, as Byron says; it is the whole existence of a man of my age. It is the one great treasure which he has learned to value beyond all others; you see, he has tried and tested them all. And he *knows*!”

“Lord Chester—” began Claire.

“One moment!” he said, pleadingly. “I want you to keep back my sentence until I have pleaded my cause. I don’t ask you if you love me. I could scarcely hope for so great a joy as that; but I ask you to ask yourself if you could bring yourself to care for me as a wife should care for her husband. If you can answer ‘Yes’—and I know you will answer truthfully—then I say that you may trust yourself and the future to me without misgiving.”

Claire was asking the question of herself as he spoke, and was silent. She liked, respected this gallant, “perfect” gentleman, his friendship was unspeakably sweet to her; but—

“Let me say a word of other matters,” he went on. “That I offer you an unstained name and an old title will not weigh with you, I know. The unstained name is only your due—you would accept no less—and the title will not count. But, Miss Sartoris, it has been a delight to me to feel that the woman I *love will, if she will* accept my hand, adorn and elevate the *title which she will bear*. If I win you I shall have won one *who will wear the coronet right nobly*. Pride and love will *hand in hand* with me. There has been no Countess of

Chester, so gracious, so sweet, so worthy of her title as you will be!"

Claire's heart beat with the mingled pride and pleasure and pain his simple, dignified words caused her.

"I can not offer you wealth, but that you do not need. I will not speak of money any further than to say, if you were as poor as you are rich, I should still beg for your hand. In a word, I love you, and respectfully and humbly ask you to forget the disparity of our ages, and to be my wife."

Claire's heart beat fast, and she felt that her eyes were filling with tears. It seemed so hard. Here was a good man, a noble man in every sense of the word, offering her the honor of his love, laying his honest and stainless heart at her feet, and—and there was no heart in her bosom to yield him! She longed to stretch out her hand and say to him, "Take me! You do not ask for love—yet. I will be your wife. I will learn to love you!"

But she could not. It was all summed up in that. She could not cheat him by seeming to promise that which she could not fulfill. Her heart was dead within her bosom; Gerald Wayre had slain it that moonlight night, months ago, and she would not deceive this high-minded man who trusted her so implicitly.

"Are you afraid to answer?" he said, after a long silence, and he spoke gently, tenderly. "Do not be. I told myself as I rode over here this morning that it was just possible that you might laugh at me—"

"Oh, no, no!" broke from her lips with a pained gesture.

"Forgive me! No, you would not do that, even if I have seemed a foolish old man; you are too kind, too gentle to laugh me to scorn. But I know that you must think—well, that I am overbold in daring to hope that a young girl, dowered with beauty beyond most other women, would dream of accepting a man old enough—"

"Don't say it!" she broke in almost piteously. "It is not that. If you knew—but I can not tell you! I have been so proud of your friendship; every time you have come, every time I have seen you, I have been glad, glad!"

He leaned forward, his eyes fixed on her face earnestly; but as she went on they fell, and a faint line came across his brow.

"If I could I would say 'Yes.' I should be so glad to say it. I know what such—such love as yours is worth—I am thrilling with pride that you should have thought me worthy to be your wife—"

"My dear!" he murmured. "Why will you not trust yourself to me?"

She rose and paced the room in deep agitation. Then she came and stood before him, her hands clasped, her head bent meekly. It almost seemed as if she were ashamed to refuse him.

"I can not!" she said, at last. "Don't ask me why. I could not tell you! You would not understand! If I were to tell you you would be too proud to—to ask me again. You would feel contempt for me—"

He started to his feet and held out his hands.

"Contempt for you! For you, whom I love and honor with all my heart!"

"Yes," she said, desperately. "I am not worthy! If you knew—"

"I ask you to tell me nothing!" he broke in. "I have no right to demand your first love—to know the secret of your heart. I do not ask for your past, but your present, your future. Give them to me, Claire, and, trust me, I will never cause you to regret it!"

She almost yielded, then drew her hands away, which he had caught in his.

"I can not," she said; and there was something in her face, in the tone of her voice, which made him drop her hands slowly and turn away with a sigh.

"You will not forgive me!" she said in a low voice.

He proved his manhood, his nobleness instantly. He turned to her with a smile—a smile that smote her more keenly than a sigh would have done.

"Forgive you for not caring for me? Ah, but you know me better than to think that, Claire," he said, taking her hand and holding it—but no longer with hope in his grasp. "Though you will not be my wife, I can not help loving you, and honoring you! If you will not have me for a sweetheart," he smiled again, and again she winced, "you must not discard me as a friend. You will let me still be your friend, Claire—I beg your pardon—Miss Sartoris!"

"No—'Claire!'" she said, her eyes blinded with tears, and she laid her other hand over his.

"Thank you!" he said, simply. "Your friendship is precious to me, and I should have grieved if you had withdrawn it. Please forget as well as forgive—Claire! forget an *old man's* folly."

"No!" she said, as the tears ran unchecked down her

cheek. "No, I shall always remember, always be proud and grateful."

"The gratitude is for me, my dear," he said, gently. "Do not cry; I am not worth a tear. You will find that I shall bear my disappointment without complaining; and that I shall comfort myself with the knowledge that though I have not gained the one woman in the world for my wife, I still hold her for—my friend."

He bent and touched her hand with his lips, and without another word left her.

And Claire, as most sensible young women would have done, flung herself on to a couch and wept sorely, more than half tempted to run after him and call him back.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE words his father had spoken to Mordaunt on his return from the dinner-party dwelt in Mordaunt's mind. It was not the first time by many that the old man had hinted at some power which he might exercise over Miss Sartoris on Mordaunt's behalf, and Mordaunt sometimes asked himself if there really was anything more in the half-implied threat than an old man's vaporings.

The following day, having some papers to which he needed Claire's signature, he walked up to the Court. It was a dark and lowering morning, and the great house stood out whitely against the black clouds. Mordaunt stood for a moment before he ascended to the terrace, and looked at the immense building. Would it ever be his, or, rather, would he ever be able to call himself the husband of its mistress?

The idea seemed preposterous, even in his altered and improved circumstances, and he bit his lips moodily as he made his way across the hall to the library. He did not fail to notice that the servants treated him with a respect which they had never accorded his father, showing that the fact that Mr. Mordaunt Sapley was going to be a great man was recognized by them as well as their betters.

He went into the library and turned over the papers and magazines which littered the table, but suddenly dropped the one in his hand as he caught the title of one of the articles in the list of contents. It was "The Undiscovered Murders of the Last Half Century."

His face was still pale when Claire entered, and he was so occupied in keeping a guard on his own expression that he did not notice that she looked weary and dispirited.

"Good-morning, Miss Sartoris," he said. "I have brought some papers for your signature."

"Yes?" said Claire, listlessly. She had been awake the greater part of the night—will the many sleepless hours women pass count in their favor at the last great reckoning, think you?—thinking of Lord Chester, and all she had been compelled, in common honor and honesty to refuse, and Mr. Mordaunt Sapley jarred on her. The old nobleman's face, voice, were still with her, and Mr. Mordaunt Sapley seemed to intrude upon her mental vision.

"Here are the leases of Moorcroft and Westacres," he said, spreading out the papers. "You will see that we have granted them on especially easy terms! I think you wished that?"

"Yes—oh, yes!" said Claire. She did not "wish" anything particularly that day, unless it were that she had never seen Gerald Wayne.

"And here are the transfers connected with Mr. Verner's land. In regard to that I should like to say, on behalf of the committee, that if you would not object, we should like to buy a portion of the land for the hospital."

Claire leaned forward at the table, her head resting on her hand.

"Take as much of it as you want, please," she said. "I will give it to you, and be very glad!"

"Thank you—on behalf of the committee," he said. "I may say that I expected that you would do this."

"Yes? You see, you have not monopolized all the generosity in the county, Mr. Mordaunt!" she said, with a half smile of indifference.

He colored.

"You mean—but it does not matter. I hope you are not annoyed, because I have—we—my father has taken an interest in local affairs?"

Claire made a gesture which just stopped short of hauteur.

"Why should I be annoyed?" she said, with a smile.

"I don't know," he said. "I thought by your manner—your voice."

Claire shook her head. "I think I am rather tired and out of sorts this morning, Mr. Mordaunt," she said.

He gathered the papers together instantly. "I will not worry you, then," he said. "To-morrow will do. I am sorry—"

"Please go on," she said. "I am quite ready; I will sign anything you want."

He opened the deeds for her, and as he did so, he looked at her with covert keenness.

"Shall I make you very angry if I ask you whether anything has happened to worry—annoy—you?" he said, gravely.

Claire raised her eyebrows with faintly indicated surprise. Mr. Mordaunt Sapley had never ventured to use this tone to her before.

"Thank you," she said. "You are very kind, but it is nothing that would interest you—nothing in which you could help me."

"I could not help you, perhaps," he said in the same low voice, but with a quick gesture, "but it could not fail to interest me. Anything that concerns you must be of the most vital interest to me."

Claire looked at him with open surprise this time.

"It is nothing to do with the estate," she said. "Do I sign here?"

"I see!" he said in a low voice. "You regard me as just—your servant."

Claire raised her head. "I am sorry if I seem abrupt," she said; "but I did not mean to offend you. You really can not help me." She smiled wearily. "No one can help me."

"Are you sure?" he said. "If you would tell me!" He paused and looked down at her, his face paler even than usual, his small eyes fixed on her face. "Miss Sartoris, there is nothing I would not do to help you, no place to which I would not go, no labor too arduous." He paused again and drew a long breath.

Claire laid down the pen and gazed up at him with her surprise visible, eloquent, in her whole face.

He waited a moment; then, impelled by the thought that he had said too little or too much to stop, he went on.

"You look astonished—surprised. How hard it is for a lady in your position to imagine, comprehend, that although a man may happen to be your inferior in position, your servant—as you deem him—he has the same capacity for feeling as yourself, that he has a heart in his bosom which a word of yours can pierce, a look can stab!"

Claire's face flushed.

"I am not aware that I have ever consciously wounded your feelings, Mr. Mordaunt," she said. "If I have, please accept my apologies."

He moved his hand, his face as flushed as hers.

"You do not understand," he said. "The very words you have just spoken prove that you do not."

Claire bent her level brows. "What is it I do not understand?" she said, turning the diamond ring on her finger absently.

"That—that I love you," he said.

It is not too much to say that for a full moment or two Claire did not grasp the significance of the words. She looked at him as one looks at a person who has addressed one in a foreign and unknown language. Then, as his meaning dawned upon her, the crimson suffused her face again, burned down to her neck and arms, and she rose and moved toward the door.

He slipped in front of her quickly, and held out his hand, effectually barring her progress.

"Wait!" he said, hoarsely. "I would take it back if I could; but it is too late—I can not! Wait and hear me! You can not refuse me that! Not even your pride will refuse me that!"

Claire stood and looked at him with steadfast eyes. It flashed through her mind that Mr. Mordaunt Sapley had either been drinking to excess or had gone out of his mind.

And yet she had not thought so when Gerald Wayre had declared his love!

"Let me pass—or say what you have to say quickly, please!" she said in a low voice, in which outraged pride rang.

"Bear with me!" he said, huskily. "I only ask you to listen. It is true that I love you, Miss Sartoris."

Coming after Lord Chester's declaration, the words sounded like an insult, and Claire could not repress a shudder.

"Oh, let me pass, please!" she breathed.

"Not yet—a moment!" he said, struggling hard for a calm and self-possession. "I *have* to speak now. Give me a hearing. Miss Sartoris, I love you. Why should you shrink from me, treat me so contemptuously! It is true I am not your equal in position, but," he moistened his lips, "I am a gentleman; I am—"

"I will not hear any more!" said Claire. "You must see— Oh, I don't wish to wound you, but, Mr. Mordaunt, let there be no more of this! It is—it is madness—I— Would it not be better to say no more?"

"No," he said, with a kind of dogged sullenness. "If I *had* spoken to you as—as I have done—six months ago, you *might have been* justified in refusing to hear me, in treating *me with scorn*; but—but things—my position, has changed *since then*. Please hear me!" for Claire had made an *impe-*

tient gesture. "I say things have changed. I have made my way into—amongst your friends—I have gained a position of which any man ought to be proud."

"I am very glad, but—" She spoke almost soothingly, as one would speak to a child or a monomaniac, but he broke in with the same dogged resolution.

"It is true that my father is only your agent, but—but he is a wealthy man. His wealth will come to me. I am ambitious. I have marked out for myself a career—have entered upon it—I feel that I shall rise, rise even above the men in this sleepy, world-forgotten place. My wife—whoever she may be—will share a name which I intend to make famous."

Claire took another step to the door, but he would not make way for her.

"I intend to enter the House—I hope to gain a name there—I have the money, the ambition, the energy. I only need you for my wife to crown my efforts, to share the position I will—yes, *will!*—attain. You hear me with silent contempt, but—but will you stop to compare me with the men you know? I do not speak with vanity. I know that I am far beneath you, but so are they all! All, every one! If you will be my wife"—he passed his hand over his brow, wet with perspiration—"I will spend my life in giving you a place which shall be as high above your present one as—*as* mine is below it!"

He stopped for lack of breath, and Claire was able to speak. She knew now that he was not intoxicated, but she still deemed him mad—mad with morbid vanity and self-esteem. So she spoke with a careful modulation of her voice, with a suppression of the indignation—and the indescribable loathing—which threatened to master her.

"Have you finished?" she said. "Will you let me answer you? You are wrong. I have no contempt for you. No woman is insulted by the offer of an honest man's hand—"

He winced, and shot a glance at her.

"But, Mr. Mordaunt, what you ask I can not give. I can not be your wife!"

"Wait!" he broke in, clinching his hands and pressing them closely to his side. "Do not give me your answer now. Don't let it be final. To-morrow—"

"If I waited for an eternity of to-morrows, my answer *would be the same*," said Claire, battling with her pride and indignation. "Please accept it, and allow me to pass."

"*Why do you hate me?*" he said in a low voice.

"I do not—" she began, then stopped; of all things, she desired to avoid an argument with him. "Is it any use our talking any longer?" she said, with a smile that was harder to bear than open scorn. "I think you will see that a *gentleman* accepts a lady's answer—and accepts it without protest, Mr. Mordaunt."

"But I can not!" he said. "I know you refuse me, because—because you still look upon me as a kind of servant. You are wrong! You will lose nothing by marrying me. Times are changing. Such men as I, rise!"

"If you rose to be prime minister—"

"You would refuse me?" he said, white to the lips.

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "I should refuse an emperor if I did not—love him!"

She paused at the word; it sounded like sacrilege under the circumstances.

He bit his lip and stood aside, and Claire was making her escape, when the door was pushed open and old Sapley entered.

He was yellow rather than pale, and his huge lips were working as if with suppressed passion, while his small eyes glowed angrily.

"Half a moment!" he said, waving a shaky paw. "I've been outside—don't speak, Mordy; leave it to me now—I've heard every word. Miss Sartoris"—he bent his heavy brows upon Claire with a threatening expression—"let me advise you to take that refusal back. Mind, I only advise! Take it back, and promise to be his wife, and I won't say another word."

"Mr. Sapley!" said Claire, crimson with anger, "are you both out of your minds?"

The old man showed his teeth.

"You'll find we're sane enough," he said, with a kind of snarl. "You heard my son's proposal. What is your answer—now that you've got my advice?"

"My answer is 'No!'" said Claire.

The old man's face grew red, then faded into its sere yellowness.

"You refuse him! You behave as if you were a princess declining a beggar! Do you know that my son will be a rich man, Miss Sartoris?"

Claire was almost incapable of speech by this time. "Mr. Mordaunt's wealth can be of no interest to me, Mr. Sapley!" she said.

He drew his lips down. "Because you've so much of your

own, eh?" he said. "You think you can afford to treat his proposal with scorn, to laugh at his prospects? You heard what he said? Mordy is going to rise. He has got his foot on the ladder; he is a good way up now. I started—"

"Father!" said Mordaunt, hoarsely.

"You leave me alone," snarled the old man; "she's got to deal with me now. You think"—glaring at Claire—"that you can afford to play the high and haughty; to come the county family upon him, because you are Miss Sartoris, of Court Regna, and he is only my son—the son of your agent? You make a great mistake, young lady, a very great mistake—"

"Be silent, father! Let Miss Sartoris pass," said Mordaunt, huskily. "She has heard me; I have got my answer."

"But she hasn't heard *me*!" said old Sapley, grimly. "And her answer will change presently. What fault do you find with my son—with Mordaunt—Miss Sartoris?"

Claire asked herself whether she was dreaming. Was this Mr. Sapley, who never approached her without a servile bow and smile? She scarcely recognized him in this grimly stern and covertly threatening old man. Surprise mingled with her indignation and anger. It would be difficult to tell which predominated.

"Would it not be better that this discussion should terminate?" she said. "Your son has done me the honor of offering me his hand"—for the life of her she could not help the emphasis on the "honor"—"and I have declined it. Surely the matter may end there! You and I have been very good friends, Mr. Sapley, and I should be sorry if anything were permitted to interrupt the—"

"You see," said Mordaunt, bitterly, "she treats us as her servants. Say no more, father. We will leave the Court—" The old man's face grew purple.

"Leave the Court—leave the Court!" he said, thickly. "Who talks of leaving the Court? Look here, young lady! Take back what you've said, and all shall go on as smoothly and pleasantly as before!" and he twisted his lips into a smile.

Claire turned to Mordaunt with a smile.

"Surely, Mr. Mordaunt, you do not combine with your father in thus roughly urging your suit?"

"Never you mind him—attend to me!" said old Sapley, *indeed, roughly*. "You think his money's no account—that *all he's offered* you doesn't signify. You're buoyed up by *ur pride—your county pride—and your money—*"

Claire made a gesture almost imperial in its command; but it had no effect.

"You listen to me! There's no hurry! You think you're Miss Sartoris of Court Regna—a kind of queen in your way. But you make a great mistake, young lady! You are a pauper!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"You are a pauper!"

The words did not impress Claire in the least. She looked at the old man's sallow face, distorted by passion, with blank amazement. She had thought Mordaunt mad; she felt certain that his father must be; and, indeed, at the moment he looked like a man whom rage and malignant resentment had bereft of reason. His hands were clinched, his lips apart, showing his fang-like teeth, his eyes glared with a kind of vindictive triumph into hers.

Mordaunt was as much amazed as Claire, and he started and looked at his father speechlessly for a moment; then he said:

"Father! What do you mean?"

Old Sapley paid no heed to him, but still regarded Claire.

"Do you hear what I say? Do you understand?" he snarled.

Claire found her voice. "I heard—yes," she said. "But I do not understand. I do not wish to hear anything more. Let me pass, please!"

"You do *not* understand," he said. "You will not go till you have realized what I mean. I repeat, Miss Sartoris, you are a pauper!"

Claire mechanically glanced round the room, as if to assure herself that she was not dreaming, that the old man who had always been so respectful, so servile, was really standing before her and uttering these strange words.

"You'd better sit down," he said, pointing a shaky hand at a chair. "What I have to tell you will startle you. You will want all your strength and presence of mind, Miss Sartoris. Yes, for all your pride, you will find the blow a crushing one."

Claire, it is needless to say, did not obey him; but stood, erect as a dart, and facing him with steadfast eyes and tightly set lips. It was he who quailed before the direct gaze of her violet eyes, and he drew a chair to the table and sunk into it.

"You think yourself mistress of Court Regna, Miss Sar-

toris," he said, more calmly, and with slow, distinct enunciation. "I tell you that not an acre of the land, not a house, not a farm, belongs to you!"

Mordaunt uttered a sudden exclamation and took a step forward; but his father held up a hand to silence him, and went on in the same dry voice:

"You do not believe me?"

"I do not believe you!" said Claire, quietly.

"I am not surprised," he said; "but wait. Do you know anything of your affairs? Do you know anything of the condition of the estate when Lord Wharton died?"

Claire was silent, but her silence answered for her.

"No," he said, with a nod of the head and a twisting of the lips. "How should you, when he himself did not know that he was up to his ears in debt, that the estate was mortgaged to the hilt?"

Claire did not start, did not remove her eyes from his face; but he saw by their expression that she had grasped the significance of his statement, and he nodded and smiled again.

"He neither knew nor cared. So long as money was forthcoming to supply his wants, he did not care where it came from, or how it came. He never remembered that there is a bottom to every purse, and that he had been sinking down to it ever since he was a young man. It was no business of mine to tell him; but when I hinted at the state of things, he cursed me, and told me not to croak. And I obeyed him."

He twisted his mouth into a sneer. "What have such men as me to do but to obey when a lord bids them! I said no more, but let things take their course. When he wanted money, I got it for him, and as he didn't ask what the getting of it cost, I didn't tell him."

He paused, and looked before him, as if recalling the old days, the long course of deception by which he had led his master to ruin.

"Acre by acre was mortgaged; money was raised by annuities, and by notes of hand, in every way by which money can be raised, and Lord Wharton knew nothing. He made his will!" he laughed discordantly, in hideous mockery, "as if he were leaving Court Regna and a large fortune to boot, whereas my lord died without a penny."

Mordaunt was beginning to understand. He leaned against the paneled wall and folded his arms; but with his eyes on the ground; and yet he could see Claire's face, and, seeing, admire its unbroken calm.

Mr. Sapley drew a long breath.

"When he died you came into possession—into possession of Court Regna, of the house and heaps of money—as you thought. In reality, you came into a pile of mortgages, a heap of debts. You asked no questions, but carried yourself as if you had been born to it all, as if it were yours by right; and I let you alone in your delusion!"

He laughed discordantly again.

"You little thought, when you treated me and my son as if we were a kind of upper servants, that your pride was built upon sand, that you were balancing on a rickety pedestal that might give way beneath you any moment and topple you over. But so it was, Miss Sartoris, so it was!"

He paused, and Claire, speaking for the first time since his announcement, turned to Mordaunt.

"Is this true?" she said, with not a quaver in her voice, with the calm regard of her grave eyes.

"I can not tell you," he said, huskily. "I know nothing about it! I ask you to believe that, until this moment, I was as ignorant as yourself."

"That's true," said the old man, with a chuckle. "He speaks the truth. Mordy's clever, very clever! He thought that I had let all the business of the estate pass into his hands; he never guessed that I'd kept the true state of the case to myself. You can believe him. He speaks the truth. He knew nothing. He never imagined, while you were queening it over us all, you were a pauper—a pauper, existing on my bounty—on his father's bounty!" Over Claire's face a wave of crimson, like a stain, passed, leaving her white to the lips.

"Your bounty?" she said, almost to herself.

"Whose else?" he retorted, roughly. "Who holds all the mortgages, the annuities, the notes of hand, but me? I've got 'em, every one!"

He leaned back as he made the statement, and, thrusting his hands into his pockets, looked up at her with a gleam of triumph in his small eyes.

Claire let her hand fall on to the table, and pressed it there, as if she needed its support.

"You?" she said, involuntarily.

"Yes, I, 'Sapley, the agent,' Sapley, you and my lord looked down upon as so much dirt; just a man, a servant to be ordered about as you pleased! To be treated civilly one day, and like a footman out of favor the next—just as it suited his whim. Yes, Miss Sartoris, I am the owner of *Regna*, every acre of it, every house upon it; the Court itself, *dose pictures*, the tables and chairs, the carpet you're stand-

ing upon. I've only to foreclose, and they are mine; for no man will be fool enough to buy them at the price I've lent on them."

Mordaunt said something—it was rather an exclamation than a coherent sentence, but old Sapley seemed to understand, and turned to him.

"Don't be afraid! Do you think I am a fool? The mortgages are not in my name. There is no betrayal of trust! I bought them honestly, fairly. I bought every note of hand honestly and fairly. No man, let him be as clever a lawyer as he may, can find a flaw in my claim. When the estate is sold, I shall get back the money I've spent. You'll be my debtor still, young lady!" He nodded at Claire.

Claire sunk into the chair at last. She felt surprised, bewildered, by the suddenness of the blow. But though she could not yet realize it, she did not doubt its genuineness, its completeness. The old man's tone carried conviction with it. She saw, every moment more clearly, how the man, spider-like, had woven his web round Lord Wharton and herself.

"Yes," he said, "like him, you asked no questions. You behaved as if you had half a million at your back. You had your horses and your carriages, your house in London, your dinner-parties, and you never asked where the money came from. You must needs pull down the old wing and rebuild it!"

Claire winced for the first time, and he laughed harshly.

"Pull down the wing of *my* house!" he said. "And when I ventured humbly to remonstrate, you stopped me with that infernal proud look of yours—"

"Father!" muttered Mordaunt; but the old man turned on him almost savagely.

"Hold your tongue! Isn't it true? Do you think I haven't felt it—that I haven't looked forward many a time, when I've borne their d——d insolence, to the hour when I could pay it back? Pay it back with interest! If you've no spirit, I have! Hold your tongue! This is *my* business!"

He turned his cavernous eyes on Claire again.

"You raised the money by a note of hand. She signed that day you passed the library. How are you going to pay me that money back? How, I ask? You can't tell, Miss Sartoris? Well, was I right when I said that you will be a pauper? Shouldn't I be right if I added that you were *my* debtor?"

Claire raised her head, which had sunk under this last humiliation, the most crushing of all.

"If it be true—I can not pay you!" she said in a low voice, as if every word caused her a separate pang.

Mordaunt drew nearer the table.

"Father," he said, almost inaudibly, "this that you have told Miss Sartoris is so sudden, so unexpected, that she does not realize it. You must see that. Do not say any more. Miss Sartoris has a right to demand a full and detailed statement, in writing, of—of your claim. This must be sent to her—she will need advice—"

The old man stopped him with a grunt.

"She shall have it. I am prepared at all points. She will find no flaw. Everything is in proper legal order. She shall have the statement any time she likes; now, if she wishes it. She can take it to anybody she pleases. I defy the cutest lawyer to pick a hole in it. Court Regna is mine—all of it!"

"Miss Sartoris would like to go now," said Mordaunt in a low voice.

"Wait a bit," said the old man. "I've got something else to say—something more pleasant, and that she'll be precious glad to hear. She's a pauper—she can take my word for it—and will have to turn out. After all," he grinned malignantly, "it ought not to be so hard. She was a nobody when she came here; she'd no right to expect Court Regna and half a million, and it oughtn't to be so hard to lose what she'd no reason to expect. You'd only go back to what you were before, young lady."

Claire rose, but he stretched out his hand.

"Wait a bit. There's no need for you to turn out at all. That's the pleasant part I'm coming to." He smiled and nodded. "You've heard what Mordy offered you? He offered to make you his wife. You refused him just now—refused him as if he'd been your footman or your groom. Perhaps it was only natural—though Mordy's a gentleman, fit for any girl—seeing your pride and the value you set upon yourself as mistress of Court Regna. Mistress of Court Regna! But you know the truth now; you know that he's as good as you—and better. I've brought you to your senses, I expect, young lady! Well, it's only right that pride should have a fall! But we—Mordy and I—bear no malice. We'll forget and forgive."

He nodded and showed his fangs in what he intended for a *conciliatory smile*. "Take back that refusal, accept Mordy's offer, and the day you're married I'll hand him a quittance *for every penny the estate owes me!*"

As the old man dealt this—his trump card, which he had

held in reserve for so many months—he leaned back and rubbed his huge hands, and emitted a self-assured chuckle. Mordaunt started and flushed redly. For a moment it seemed as if he were about to speak, but he checked himself, and, folding his arms, stood motionless, with his eyes fixed on the ground, waiting for Claire's answer.

"That's the way out of the business," said old Sapley. "There's one way out of the quagmire, and as you're a sensible young lady, you'll take it, I guess. Accept Mordy. He's young and clever, and, come to the actual fact, he's master of Court Regna."

Claire remained silent, her eyes fixed on the mean and sordid face, never meaner or more sordid than now, at his moment of triumph.

"There's no need to set all the gossiping tongues wagging," he went on. "I've kept the secret of the condition of affairs pretty tightly; we can keep it still. You can have an early marriage—the earlier the better; and just before you start on the honey-moon I'll give Mordy a release from every mortgage and lien I hold. Ay, and there'll be more money when I'm dead and gone, Miss Sartoris. Even if you'd still been mistress of Court Regna, you wouldn't have made a bad bargain by marrying the son of old Sapley."

He paused a moment, then turned his head to Mordaunt.

"What do you say, Mordy? You'll repeat your offer, eh?"

Mordaunt moistened his lips.

"Miss Sartoris knows that I will do so, that the great desire of my life is to make her my wife," he said in a low voice.

"*That's* all right, then," said the old man. "Well, Miss Sartoris, what's your answer?"

He waited, as if he were assured of what it would be, and he nodded to Mordaunt in a self-satisfied way.

Claire raised her head.

"You ask for my answer, Mr. Sapley," she said, quite quietly, with a calmness which was more expressive than any expression of indignation would have been. "You shall have it. I repeat my refusal. If not only Court Regna and every penny I possess, but my life itself, depended upon my doing so, I would not marry your son."

Mordaunt started forward, as if about to speak, but no words came. Old Sapley struggled to his feet, then sunk down and opened and shut his lips, as if struggling to restrain himself.

"You—you refuse? But come, come! You're put out a bit. It's only natural. I may have been a bit rough and hard on you—I dare say I was. But I take back everything I've said that you object to. I take it back. Don't speak in a hurry. Take time. Think it over; consider your position—it's a devilish tight one! Remember how you stand. A pauper—Court Regna gone; you turned out without a penny, just the clothes on your back and your trinkets—and I'm not sure but what I could force you to give them up!" He glared up at her threateningly. "Take time. Take a day; tell him to-morrow; sleep upon it—"

"I do not need any time," said Claire, as calmly as before. "Nothing—nothing, not the fear of death itself—would induce me to consent to be your son's wife. You have got Court Regna—but—I am free!"

The old man sprung to his feet and made a grab at her arm, scarcely knowing what he was doing in his rage and amazement. Claire drew back beyond his reach, the color flooded her face, the glorious eyes blazed their woman's indignation and scorn upon him, and upon the motionless figure beside him.

"Do not touch me! Do not! Let me pass!"

The old man quailed before her, and instinctively drew aside, and Claire, without another word or glance at him, passed out.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MORDAUNT looked at his father, and drew a long breath. "All this is true, I suppose?" he said.

The old man had sunk into his chair again, and was clutching the arms and breathing hard, as if he had not yet recovered from Claire's passionate refusal of the offer which he had felt certain she would accept.

"Yes, it's true," he answered. "It's been the work of my life. I have planned and toiled for it day and night. Gradually, bit by bit, I have bought the mortgages, got hold of every note of hand. My name has never appeared in the matter—I took good care of that! When Lord Wharton died he had no idea of how he stood; he thought there were some debts, some incumbrances, but he imagined that she was *leaving enough* money to clear these off and leave Miss Sartoris a wealthy woman. The interest on the mortgages and *notes of hand* has not been paid for years; the accumulation *enough to swamp the estate.*"

"You have done the thing completely!" said Mordaunt, grimly.

The old man nodded and chuckled harshly. "I have!" he said, as if the praise were only his due. "No one suspects how matters stand; no one would have known if this girl hadn't played the fool. Who is she, to set her back up and oppose me? She came here without a penny! You talk of servants, she had no right to expect the money; what was she, a servant! What right had she to expect Lord Wharton to leave her Regna? She was robbing the other relations!"

"That is nonsense!" said Mordaunt, curtly. "But she has balked your plans."

The old man showed his teeth. "Not she!" he said. "She was taken aback, and got riled. She's as proud as Satan—you'll have to teach her to be a little more meek when you marry her, Mordy."

"When! When!" exclaimed Mordaunt, bitterly.

"Don't be afraid," said Sapley; "she'll come to her senses, and pretty soon. Give her till this time to-morrow to realize her position—to realize that, instead of being mistress of Court Regna, she is—nobody." He threw out his hands with a scornful gesture.

"And if she should not?" asked Mordaunt.

"Then let her go," said the old man, thrusting his head forward. "Let her go, and we'll step into her place."

Mordaunt laughed scornfully. "Yes," he said, "we should look well at Court Regna, you and I; to be shunned by every respectable man, woman, and child in the place! We should be regarded as usurpers, scoundrels who had robbed her and turned her out. What good would it be to us? Of what use would be the position I have gained of late? Not one of the men who have received me in so friendly a way would look at me or touch my hand. Good-bye to all my hopes of taking a place in the county, of making a name for myself!"

The old man's head sunk. "Is this your gratitude?" he said. "I've done it all for *you*. I might have had Court Regna for myself long ago, but I only thought of you. I should have been content to have gone on in the old way; it is for you I planned and worked—for you, my only son."

Mordaunt paced up and down. "I am only showing you how things will turn out," he said.

The old man drew a long breath. "Let me think!" he said. "There must be some way of working it." His head *sunk down*, and his hands worked nervously on the arm of

the chair. "I have it!" he said, at last, looking up. "I'm not going to be beaten, after all these years, by a chit of a girl! If she won't marry you, she must go! Let it be understood that we've bought the place; she can give out that she's tired of it—wants a change. I'll make her an allowance, settle an annuity upon her. You shall say how much. For myself, I wouldn't give her a penny; she has treated us like dirt, and if I had my way she should turn out as poor as she came."

Mordaunt shook his head. "You don't know Miss Sartoris," he said. "You are right—she is as proud as Satan, and would rather die than accept a penny from us."

The old man's face worked, and he laughed incredulously. "Try her! Try her!" he said, mockingly. "Women are all alike where money's concerned. But, mark my words, it won't come to that. She'll take back her refusal to-morrow, and accept you with a 'Thank you, sir!'"

Mordaunt shook his head again, but said nothing, and the old man rose slowly and stiffly. "I want to go home," he said, with peevish irritability. "I'm tired and upset. But, mind, I'll have my way. Either she marries you, or leave the Court! Give me your arm."

They went slowly out of the house. On the terrace old Sapley stopped and looked up at the house, his deep-set eyes traveling from end to end of it, as if he were gloating over it.

"I came here a servant," he said in a low voice. "I will see you master before I die, Mordy!"

When Claire left the library she went straight to her own room. Her heart was beating fast, her eyes were burning with the fever of indignation which Mr. Sapley's treatment of her had aroused. For a time the fact that Mordaunt Sapley had presumed to offer her marriage, and that his father had dared to threaten her, absorbed all her mind; but presently, as she paced up and down the room, with her hands clasped in front of her, she began to remember the old man's statement. It came upon her like a flash, and she stopped and pushed the hair from her forehead and looked straight before her, trying to grasp the fact in all its significance.

Most women would have been overwhelmed by the suddenness of the blow and the completeness of the ruin which had overtaken her; but Claire possessed more strength of character than most women, and her experience and training had been *peculiar*. If she had been born to the splendor of Court *Regna*, she might indeed have been utterly crushed by the *prospect of its loss*; but, as Mr. Sapley had said, she had come

to the Court a penniless girl, and that fact softened the blow. But it also enabled her more easily to realize what the change would mean. Though she had never been puffed up by her accession to wealth and place, she had valued both in a reasonable way.

There is no woman alive, certainly no young and healthy girl, who does not prefer a palatial country mansion and a house in town to dingy lodgings; rich dresses and jewels to shabby-genteel attire; horses and carriages to a seat in a penny 'bus; a host of well-trained servants to a smutty-faced slavey—or none at all—titled and well-born friends to the companionship of the vulgar and ill-bred. And it was just this difference, this terrible contrast between wealth and poverty, which she had now to face.

It did not occur to her to doubt Mr. Sapley's statement. She knew that he would not have dared to make it if it had not been absolutely true. And there was no improbability in it; it was just what such a man would do. She remembered how entirely Lord Wharton had intrusted business matters to this man; she herself had left everything in his hands, had never asked how the money came which she had spent, without the least regard to the amount; had signed papers, without understanding their import. It was more than probable that she had played into Mr. Sapley's hands, and had, so to speak, helped to complete her own ruin.

The blow was hard to bear, but the fact that Mordaunt had dared to ask her to marry him, that his father had proposed a bargain which would include her acceptance of Mordaunt Sapley as a husband, was still harder to endure. The thought made her cheeks burn, and brought tears to her smarting eyes. Only yesterday one of the noblest of men had asked her to be his wife, had deemed her worthy to bear his name and title; and now to-day, Mordaunt Sapley had dared to insult her by standing by and acquiescing in his father's vile proposal.

What should she do? There was no one to whom she could go for advice. Lord Chester occurred to her, but she shrunk from the mere thought of telling him of the humiliation which had been inflicted upon her. Mrs. Lexton was away, and even if she had been at the Court, Claire felt that she could not have told her. Mrs. Lexton would have offered to share her slender purse with her, but Claire's proud nature recoiled from the charity even of so close a friend. She bathed her hot face, and sat down, determined to face the situation calmly. She must leave Court Regna.

Every moment she remained there she was, as Mr. Sapley

had so brutally told her, a pensioner on his bounty. She was living in his house. Everything was his, the very chair in which she sat. The reflection caused her to rise from it and pace the room again. She must leave the Court at once. She would go from it as she came, alone and friendless.

She asked herself what money she possessed. She had come to the Court with a few pounds in her pocket; she might lay claim to these. Lord Wharton had given her, at various times, on her birthday, and when she had said or done something that pleased him, or when it suited his humor, various articles of jewelry. These she felt she was entitled to. The Wharton diamonds, the rare and costly gems, which had been left to her, were part and parcel of the estate, and belonged to Mr. Sapley, and would go with the rest to pay the money owing to him. She would take nothing from the Court but the few pounds with which she had entered and the trinkets which had been presented to her.

She went to her wardrobe and chose the plainest and least expensive dress, and put the jewelry and a change of clothes into a Gladstone bag. Then she stood in the middle of the room, nerving herself for a last farewell of the place which she suddenly discovered she loved better than she had ever suspected. With all its splendor, it had been home to her. She had never fully realized the importance of its possession; but now it had gone from her she felt how good a thing it had been to be "mistress of Court Regna."

She went along the wide corridor slowly, and looking at the pictures as she passed, step by step she descended the broad stairs. The light from the stained window fell in brilliant flecks upon the white statuary, upon the gleaming men in armor, upon the tattered flags suspended from the roof. The grandeur of the place impressed her as it had never done before; the inanimate objects seemed endowed with sentience, and to be whispering to her with sad and mournful solemnity, the pregnant word, "Farewell!"

She entered the drawing-room and looked round at the magnificent decorations, the antique furniture, and the unique bric-a-brac which Lord Wharton had collected from nearly every country under the sun. The richness of the apartment had almost been unnoticed by her before; she appreciated it now. From the drawing-room she went into the dining-room and looked at the carved panels, the painted ceilings, the great bronzes on their pedestals of black marble, the massive plate on the great oak sideboard. Then she went to the stable. The mare whinnied at her approach, and as she put

her arms round its glossy neck, it thrust its soft nose against her cheek, as if it understood what had happened, and that this—the tears that dropped upon its neck, Claire's broken words of endearment and parting—meant good-bye. She could scarcely tear herself away from the horse which had been her loving companion on many a long and happy ride, for it was harder to part from it, this living thing that returned her love with a tenfold interest, than from all the grandeur and luxury, and stately magnificence of the Court.

Her eyes were still full of tears as she re-entered the hall. Her maid was passing, and Claire, with a movement of her hand, stopped her.

"I have packed a bag; it is in my room," she said. "Will you ask one of the men to take it down to the station?"

"Yes, miss," said the maid. "Will you have the open carriage?"

"No; I will walk," said Claire.

The maid was too well trained to show her surprise, but she noticed Claire's pallor and her red eyes. "Have you a headache, miss?" she said. "Shall I bathe your head with eau-de-Cologne, or get you a cup of tea?"

The girl had always been kind to her—for servants can be kind as well as mistresses—and Claire was fond of her. It cost her a great effort to repress a burst of tears.

"No—no, thank you," she said. "The walk will do me good. I'm going up to London—I do not know when I shall be back."

She paused at the foot of the stairs and took a sovereign from her purse. "Sophie, I saw a very pretty bonnet in the milliner's window at Thraxton; I think it will suit you; will you get it?"

The maid took the sovereign, and crimsoned with pleasure, and Claire hurried upstairs, out of hearing of her thanks. She put on her out-door things, and then knelt beside the bed in which she should never sleep again. Then she rose, and slowly, with bent head, left the house. On the terrace steps she turned and looked back, as Mr. Sapley had done; but with what a different emotion!

She had to pass the old wing, and she looked at it with a curious feeling of unreality; it almost seemed that the part which Gerald Wayre had played in her life was only a dream, and, as she recalled his words about the difference in their station, she murmured: "I am as poor as he now—even poorer!" She glanced at the cottage in which old Mrs. Bur-

don was crooning by the fire, then entered the small avenue which led to the station.

She had got half-way down it when Mordaunt Sapley came out from a side path. He was walking with bent head and his hands clasped behind him, and his brows were knit and his lips set tightly, as if he were occupied with anything but pleasant thoughts, notwithstanding his father's recent intelligence.

As he saw Claire he started, and his face grew red. Claire would have passed him without any greeting, or, at most, a slight inclination of her head; but he raised his hat and addressed her.

"I am glad to meet you, Miss Sartoris," he said. "I was coming up to the Court in the hope that you would see me."

Claire looked straight before her, her face as impassive as a statue's.

"I wanted to assure you," he went on, "once more, and with all the emphasis of which I am capable, that until my father spoke in the library just now I was quite ignorant of—of the state of affairs. I beg you to believe this, Miss Sartoris, and to acquit me of any share in the—transactions which have resulted so disastrously for you."

"I believe you," she said.

He looked at her quickly, with a gleam of hope in his eyes. "I can't tell you the relief your words bring to me!" he said. "I wish I could convince you that not only have I had no share in this business, but that I regret it—regret it!"

Claire said nothing in response to this.

"I should also like to say how bitterly I regret that my father should have—have used such language to you."

"Mr. Sapley only spoke as his nature prompted him," said Claire.

Mordaunt bit his lips. "I know! I know!" he said. "But, Miss Sartoris, you will not punish me for his offense?"

"I have no desire, no power, to punish you, Mr. Mordaunt," she said.

"I have come to you, Miss Sartoris, to make a proposal."

Claire's eyes began to flash.

"I beg you will not misunderstand me," he said, reddening, and looking down. "I have come to make a proposal of—a business nature."

"What is it?" said Claire, calmly, coldly.

"I have been talking the matter over with my father—have endeavored to convince him that your decision—your refusal is irrevocable."

"It is," said Claire, as coldly as before.

He bit his lip again, and shot a glance at her. "And I have pointed out to him that though we—he—may legally claim Court Regna, it will be unjust to—to deprive you of the whole of your fortune."

"I have no fortune," said Claire. "It seems that nothing has ever belonged to me; that Mr. Sapley really owned it all."

Mordaunt shuffled his foot on the ground. "I fear that is so," he said. "Yes, I *fear*! For I need not say, Miss Sartoris, that if I had my own way every penny should be restored to you. But you would not listen to this?"

Claire's silence was a sufficient assent.

"But though you will not consent to this, I trust that you will accept an offer of an income of a thousand a year. I have put it at so small a sum," he went on, quickly, "because I felt that you would not accept of more."

"I can not accept even that," said Claire. "It is a large sum, Mr. Mordaunt; but even if it were one represented by the smallest coin of the realm, my answer would be the same. Your father reminded me that I had been a pensioner on his bounty, a recipient of his charity; do you think that I am one to remain in such a condition for one moment longer than I can help, for one moment after my knowledge of the fact?"

"You visit my father's sins upon my head," he said, huskily. "Will you not take the money from me?"

"From *you*!" broke from Claire; then she recovered command of herself. "Mr. Mordaunt, no doubt you mean well. I thank you for your intention. But you do not understand that, though I were starving, I could not accept even a crust of bread from your hand."

"I see!" he said. "Your scorn of me is so great."

"Say, rather, my self-respect."

He looked at her from under his brows. "May I ask where you are going?" he said.

"I do not acknowledge your right to ask me, but I will tell you. I am leaving Court Regna—forever!"

He started, and lifted his head. "You are leaving Court Regna—at once?"

"At once," she said, very quietly. "I have no right to remain here. I have no wish to remain there—under your father's roof."

He winced, as if she had struck him. "Your pride carries you a long way, Miss Sartoris!" he said.

"Yes; it will carry me beyond the reach of your father's insults and your persecution."

His hands clinched and his lips worked; he looked like a copy of his father at that moment.

"You are going—alone? You have money?"

"Yes, I am going alone, as I came; and I take with me just the money and the few trinkets which I deem belong to me. I leave everything else to Mr. Sapley; you will find that nothing has been disturbed, that it is all as Lord Wharton left it."

"My God! it is too much!" he said, half maddened by her coldness, by the stab contained in every low-spoken word. "I say you shall not go! You shall not go until you have had time to think—to come to some agreement!" He took a step forward, with his hand outstretched, as if to actually take hold of her.

Claire's face went white as marble, but she did not move. "Do not attempt to stop me! Do not dare to touch me! We are within hearing of the servants. If I call to them for help, Mr. Mordaunt Sapley, they will not recognize you as their master yet, and will protect me."

Memory is a strange thing. There flashed across her mind the scene in the plantation when Gerald had beaten this man for ill-treating the dog, and she added: "I am not a helpless animal, to come at your call, Mr. Sapley; you can not punish me for not doing so, as you punished the dog in the plantation!"

Mordaunt shrunk back, startled and overwhelmed by her allusion. She raised her hand and pointed to the house. "Go on to the house, and leave me to go my way!"

There was something in her voice, in her gesture, before which Mordaunt's craven spirit perforce yielded, and he actually turned and walked away, with the air and gait of a beaten hound. Claire did not watch him, but stood, motionless, until his footsteps had died away, then she went on—into the new life which awaited her.

CHAPTER XXV.

CLAIRE went on to the station, got her bag, and took a ticket for Waterloo. She had almost taken a first-class before *she remembered* that she was no longer the mistress of Court Regna; and her pale face colored slightly at the respectful air of surprise with which the booking-office clerk handed her a *third*.

The train was not a crowded one, and she had the compartment to herself. She was too tired and overstrained to sleep, and almost too worn out to think; but half-way on her journey it suddenly occurred to her that Mordaunt Sapley might follow her, or instruct some one to play the spy upon her movements; and though she was not afraid of Mordaunt Sapley, she had no desire to have anything further to do with him. She had relinquished Court Regna to him and his father, and, if it were possible, she wanted to forget both the place and the men into whose hands it had fallen. Whenever she thought of Mordaunt's avowal of love, and his father's insolent proposal, the blood burned in her face, and a choking sensation came into her throat. Yes, she had done with the old life of ease and luxury forever; she was going back to the world of labor and poverty from which she had sprung, and the sooner she taught herself to forget Court Regna and the position which she had held, the better for her. She sighed as she thought how difficult it would be; for had she not found it impossible to forget Gerald Wayre?

Instead of waiting till the train got to Waterloo, she alighted at Clapham Junction. Now, Clapham Junction, though an extremely convenient place from which to start on a journey to any point of the compass, is not, to put it mildly, a very inviting place as seen from the station, though if Claire had walked a very little way she would have found herself in an extremely pleasant neighborhood, in which are some of those delightful old mansions, with which the suburbs of London are so rich. But she didn't like the view from the station, and she took a train that was starting from another platform, and got out at Streatham.

Streatham is, in its way, unique. She saw a High Street of pretty, red-brick houses and shops, with a wide and pretty common beyond, and trees and flowers in plenty. She could scarcely believe that she was only a few miles from the great noisy Babylon.

A sharp-eyed urchin offered to carry her bag, and she set out to find some place in which to lay her head. She had to walk some distance to a more closely built part of the town before she could find a card of "apartments" in a window, and when she did, her heart began to fail her. But she plucked up courage and knocked at the door. A young girl opened it, and, scarcely waiting for Claire's inquiry, fled down the passage, calling "mother." A respectable-looking woman, with anxious eyes and mouth, appeared, and asked Claire in. Claire said she wanted a room, only one room,

and not an expensive one. She could not say for how long she would require it; it all depended upon—upon circumstances. The woman eyed the beautiful face and the graceful figure with timid suspicion for a moment or two, then something in Claire's eyes—and very probably the presence of the expensive bag—reassured her, and she took Claire upstairs and showed her a room. It was small and plainly furnished, and clean.

"It's the only room I have, miss—ma'am," she said, hesitating, inquiringly.

"My name is Sartoris, *Miss Claire Sartoris*," said Claire. "I have come from the country to look for employment."

The woman glanced at Claire's dress, which, though plain in form, was obviously of good and fashionable material, and seemed puzzled; then she sighed as if Claire's business was none of hers.

"The rent will be a pound a week, miss," she said. "You take your meals in this little sitting-room," and she opened another door.

Claire had not intended to pay so much, but the cleanliness of the place was inviting; and, indeed, she was too tired to continue her search.

"I will take the room for a week, at least," she said.

"Very good, miss," said the landlady. "I will do my best to make you comfortable. I have only one other lodger, a lady, and you will find the house very quiet."

"I am sure I shall be very comfortable," said Claire.

The bag was brought up, and the landlady got her some tea, and Claire sat down and tried to realize that she was *herself*, and that the little room was, at any rate for a time, her home. After she had got through her tea—it took her some time to get through, though it was only the cup that cheers, and does not inebriate, and bread and butter—she got out her writing-case and wrote a letter to Mrs. Lexton.

It was a difficult letter to write, for Claire could not tell her the whole of the circumstances, and had to conceal from her the fact that she, Claire, only possessed a few pounds in the world. She dared not even send Mrs. Lexton her address, for she knew that the tender-hearted woman would leave even the sick-bed at which she was a ministering angel, to fly to Claire's assistance. And Claire did not want even Mary Lexton. She had resolved to fight the battle alone, and not to be a burden upon any one.

So she said that circumstances had arisen which necessitated her leaving the Court; that she had come up to London,

but did not know whether she should remain there. It was very probable that she might go abroad. She wrote as lovingly as she dared, and as cheerfully as if her leaving the Court so suddenly had been prompted by a whim, and she promised to write again as soon as she had "settled down."

Then she went to bed, and, strange to say, slept soundly.

The next morning, after breakfast, she went out and bought a newspaper, and returning with it, sat down to commence her search for that which is so difficult to obtain nowadays—work.

Like a great many young women in her situation, she asked herself what she could do. She was well educated—Lord Wharton had engaged good masters for her when she had first come to the Court—she could speak French and German fluently, and play the piano with a skill, and something more of the feeling, which most English ladies display. It seemed to her that it ought not to be difficult to get a governess's situation. She was fond of children, and felt sure that she could learn the art of teaching.

She pored over the advertisements for half an hour, then selected two and answered them, stating her qualifications.

There were other advertisements, offering situations to lady clerks and typewriters; but Claire shrunk from the confinement which a clerkship meant, and she had never so much as seen a typewriter.

She went out and posted her letters, and walked round the pretty common until dinner-time. As she was going along the passage to her room on her return, a lady came down the stairs. Claire was rather startled, for the lady wore the garb of a Sister of Mercy. As she came down, she raised her bent head and looked at Claire.

Claire caught a glimpse of a pale face, with patient eyes shining softly beneath a deeply lined brow and snow-white hair; it was only a glimpse, for the sister lowered her veil and passed on with head again bent.

Claire wondered whether that was her fellow-lodger, and asked the question of the landlady's daughter, who was tidying Claire's room. The girl was a shy, commonplace child, who was called, absurdly enough, "Queenie," though anything less regal could scarcely be imagined. The absurdity of the name was heightened by the fact that she was shabbily dressed in old finery, and that she did not possess a single "H."

"Yes, miss," she said, with a Cockney smile, half shy, and half familiar. "That's the other lodger; she's Sister Agnes."

Ma's 'ad 'er for years. She's a very quiet lady, and *quite* a lady, ma says, though she is a sister and poor."

"Has she no other name?" asked Claire, in whom the sweet and patient face had aroused a deep interest.

"Not as we've ever 'eard, miss. She's called Sister Agnes, and that's all. She ain't what you'd call a regular sister, but she works with our clergyman; she's orfully good to the poor, and goes reading to them and nursing them when they're ill. Ma says that she gives nearly all her money away, and that she leaves scarcely enough to keep 'erself on. She don't pay much; but she don't give no trouble, and she's that quiet and gentle-like, that you'd scarcely know that she was in the 'ouse. It's better than 'aving single gentlemen. Them single gentlemen is orful! Mrs. Brown over the way 'as got one. He comes home drunk every night, and carries on dreadful; sometimes he opens the winder and sings comic songs at the top of 'is voice. You'll 'ear 'im one night, miss. Oh, ma says, please would you like a tapioca or a rice? Some people likes one and some likes the other; and ma says she should like to know."

Claire absently declared for the tapioca, and Queenie departed.

The day wore away slowly enough. But the next morning Claire saw, with a leap of her heart, two letters lying on her breakfast-table.

They must be the letters in response to her answers to the advertisements! She opened them with a nervous eagerness. Both the letters were brief requests that she would call at certain addresses. She could scarcely believe in her good fortune, for she had always heard that there were so many applications for every vacant situation. It struck her that both notes were written in business-like hands, and that their form was very much alike; but she was too excited to pay much attention to this.

She could scarcely eat any breakfast, and, putting on her things, hurried off to the first address, which was in Trinity Street. It was a private house of good appearance, but she was rather surprised at being shown into a kind of office, and still more surprised when a young man, who looked like a clerk, rose from a desk and asked her her business, just as an ordinary clerk is in the habit of doing. Claire explained, and handed him the letter.

"Oh, ah, yes!" he said in a listless way. "Indoor or outdoor?" And he opened the ledger and took up his pen.

"I don't understand," said Claire. "I wrote in answer

to an advertisement asking for a governess in the family of a lady. Does she not live here? Perhaps I have mistaken the house."

"No, it's all right," said the young man in a tired kind of way. "We put the advertisement in. It's the regular thing."

"The regular thing?" said Claire.

"Yes, this is a registry office." He checked himself suddenly, as if struck by Claire's innocence, and in a different tone went on: "Oh—er—that lady's suited, but we've several other applications. If you will give me your name and address, and your qualifications, I'll enter them in our register, and send you word when we hear of anything likely to suit you. There's a fee of half a crown," he added, as an afterthought.

Claire began to understand. She was not quite so foolish as to part with her half crown, but confined herself to thanking the young man, and went out. Stifling her disappointment as well as she could, she took a 'bus to the second address. Again it was a private house, with a well-to-do appearance, and again she found herself in an office-like apartment, and confronted with a clerk-like youth; but he was inclined to be insolent until he met one of Claire's direct looks.

"Situation's gone," he said. "Put your name down, if you like."

"This is a registry office, then?" said Claire.

The youth grinned, and twirled an incipient mustache.

"What did you think it was?" he asked.

Claire said, very quietly, that she thought it would have been the private house of a lady advertising for a governess.

The youth laughed again, and arranged his hair with a be-ringed and rather dirty hand.

"That's what they all think," he said. "But it's all right enough! We do get a good many situations for our clients, honor bright! You pay the fee—it's half a crown—and I'll put your name down and keep a look-out; I will, really. Look 'ere, I've got several others before you, but I'll put you first on the list; I will!"

Claire looked at him as if she did not see him, and left the office. Her heart was very heavy as she went home, all the heavier for the hope which had lightened it in the morning. *She wondered how many poor girls had been deceived, as she had been, by this heartless trick!*

She bought several newspapers that evening and answered

several advertisements which, upon consideration, she deemed genuine. But no answers came. But she would not despair, and every day she wrote applications for situations of various kinds. One day, the beginning of the second week, a letter came from a lady who had advertised for a governess, asking Claire to go and see her.

Claire went, with hope once more springing within her bosom. The house was in one of the fashionable squares, and a handsomely appointed carriage stood at the door, which a footman opened to her. He conducted her to a beautifully furnished room on the first floor, and said that his mistress would be disengaged in a few minutes.

The room was divided from the adjoining apartment by curtains only, and Claire could hear two ladies talking. She could hear quite plainly.

"So she gave me notice," said one. "Of course, if I had thought that she would have flown into a temper, I shouldn't have spoken to her. I shouldn't have dared to do so; though, really, she was anything but a good cook. I'm sure I don't know what I shall do!"

"It's so difficult to get a cook of any kind," said the other lady.

"Yes," assented the first. "And they ask such wages! I give this one twenty-eight pounds a year."

In her advertisement for a governess she had offered twenty-five.

"I'm afraid you will have to give more than that," said her friend. "You won't get anything decent under thirty pounds."

Claire listened with a sad smile, that was also just a little bitter. Presently the visitor took her departure, and Claire was shown into the other room.

Her interview with the lady was a brief one. It appeared that what she wanted was a lady who could teach English, French, Latin, the piano, and the violin to three girls and two boys. Claire was prepared to undertake the English, the French, and even the piano, but, alas! she did not know Latin or the violin; and the lady, who appeared to be quite surprised by such phenomenal ignorance on the part of any one applying for the position of governess, rather curtly declined such insufficient services.

The tears were very near Claire's eyes as she left the house. Then, suddenly she remembered the story of Gerald's struggles, as he had told them to her that morning outside the chapel. Surely a woman ought to possess as much courage as a man.

She would not give way to despair and own herself vanquished. There *must* be some work for a woman to do, if she could only find it. If she could only find it! She was sitting over her tea, with a bad headache and a worse heart-ache, and was counting over what remained of her money, when Queenie came in with some more hot water.

"You're home earlier than usual, Queenie," said Claire, for the sake of saying something.

"Yes, miss," said the girl. "One of our teachers is ill, and the 'ead mistress dismissed the school half an hour earlier, 'cos she 'ad to do all the work. She was a'most worried to death, the other teacher going so sudden like. I don't know what she'll do to-morrer, I'm sure. They say the other teacher is very bad indeed, and that she won't be able to come back to the school even if she gets better. I'm sorry; for she wasn't so 'ard as Miss Gover, the 'ead mistress."

An idea occurred to Claire. It is wonderful how quickly ideas come when necessity sharpens the wits!

"That large red building at the end of the street is your school, isn't it, Queenie?" she said.

"Yes, miss," said Queenie. "Was you thinking of applying for the place, miss?" she added with Cockney sharpness.

"Yes, that was just what I was thinking of doing," said Claire.

"Then I'd go at once, miss," said the girl, shrewdly. "There'll be hundreds and shoals directly they know there's a vacancy!"

"I'll go at once," said Claire; and she put on her hat and jacket and started there and then.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE school-house door was ajar, and receiving a sharp little "Come in!" in answer to her knock, Claire entered the large school-room. For a moment or two she could not see from whom the "Come in!" had proceeded; then she saw, seated at a table in a distant corner, a tiny little woman, with dark and piercing eyes shining from a pale, overworked face. A heap of exercise-books lay on the table before her, and it was evident that she was hard at work correcting them, and did not welcome the interruption.

Strangely enough, Claire felt more nervous in the presence of this little creature with the sharp eyes and sallow face than she had felt during all her interviews with employers of

higher station. There was something disconcerting in the steady scrutiny, which seemed, so to speak, to take Claire to pieces and examine her microscopically.

"I wish to see Miss Gover," she said, though she felt sure that, notwithstanding her elfish appearance, this must be the head mistress.

"I am Miss Gover," was the response in a sharp, clear, decisive voice.

"I heard that you were in want of an under-teacher," said Claire.

A faint astonishment showed itself in Miss Gover's face.

"Will you take a seat?" she said. "How did you hear this?"

Claire felt as if she were a school-girl again, coming up for punishment.

"I heard it from my landlady's—Mrs. Holland's—little girl. I only heard it five minutes ago, and I ventured to come here at once, because I hoped that you would allow me to take the under-teacher's place until she got better."

"She will never get better," said Miss Gover in a low voice. "But that's not the question. Will you tell me your name?"

Claire told her. Miss Gover wrote it down on a slip of paper.

"What certificates have you?" she asked.

"I have none," said Claire, her heart sinking.

"No certificate?" said Miss Gover, rising. Claire rose, too. "Where have you been teaching?"

"I have never taught," said Claire.

Miss Gover looked at her curiously.

"You seem to be very ignorant of the qualifications that are necessary for a school-teacher nowadays. This is not a Board School, but a teacher has to hold a certificate, all the same. Did you not know this?"

Claire felt that her eyes were beginning to fill with tears. But she fought against them, and even smiled.

"I ought to have known it," she said. "I ought to have remembered; but I didn't stop to think. I have been trying to find work for so long, and it is very difficult to obtain. There are so many things wanted. And when one is poor one grasps at the least chance."

Miss Gover looked at Claire, and in the glance seemed to take in every detail of her dress.

"You've not always been poor?" she said. "But I beg your pardon!"

"There is no need," said Claire, gently. "No, I've not always been poor. It is only lately. You will forgive me for troubling you. I see now how presumptuous it was! I must not keep you from your work any longer."

The beautiful face, the sweet, musical and beautiful voice, had their effect upon the sharp but kind-hearted little mistress.

"Wait a moment," she said. "Please sit down;" and she pointed to a chair, as if Claire were one of her school-girls. "What is it you think you can teach?"

Claire said, quite humbly—fancy Claire Sartoris, the mistress of Court Regna, humble—that she thought she could teach English, French, German, and music.

Miss Gover nodded.

"That would be more than enough," she said; "but there is still the difficulty of the certificate. I could not engage the most capable person in the world if she had not passed the necessary examination. I am very sorry, because I should like to take you."

Claire was silent for a moment, then she looked up quickly.

"You mean that I could not be a paid teacher," she said.

"Yes, I quite understand; but would you—would you let me come and help you, without receiving a salary?"

Miss Gover looked at her.

"What good would that do you?" she said, briskly.

"It would do me a very great deal of good," said Claire.

"It would mean *work*—something to do, something to keep me from thinking and brooding." She stopped and pressed her lips together. "And I should be gaining experience. Perhaps, while I am here, trying to help you, I might endeavor to pass this examination. Then, if this poor girl should not recover—but, indeed, I hope she may!"

Miss Gover shook her head.

"It doesn't sound fair," she said.

"Please do not refuse me," pleaded Claire. "I will try my very hardest to be of use to you. I am very strong, and not easily tired, and I am fond of children; I will do whatever you tell me, and I will promise not to be disappointed, or, at any rate, not to make it hard for you to get rid of me if you should find I can not help you."

The little woman leaned her head upon her hand and looked at Claire strangely. The humility of this beautiful girl, whose air and carriage so plainly proclaimed the lady, touched her acutely.

"I don't know what to do," she said. "Of course I a

answerable to my Board of Management. But I imagine," with a little smile, "they will not object to my getting an assistant so cheaply. Well, I will risk it. You may come."

Claire's face flushed.

"How can I thank you?" she faltered.

"I will help you with your examination," continued Miss Gover, "and if you should pass—and it isn't very difficult for an educated woman—I will do my best to procure you the situation. Fortunately for you, we have no pupil teachers for the present, or of course I should have to give one of them the chance."

Claire murmured her thanks again.

"Let me see, Mrs. Holland's is No. 29, isn't it?" said Miss Gover. "Now, will you give me a couple of references, please?"

Claire's face flushed, and then went pale.

"References?" she repeated in a low voice. "I am afraid I can not."

The head mistress laid down her pen and looked at her with surprise, and a shadow of suspicion—only a shadow, which passed in a moment.

"Surely you must know two persons who would—who would vouch for your respectability?"

Claire's lips quivered as she shook her head.

"No," she faltered; "I know no one. I have been very foolish to come to you, to forget how impossible it would be for any persons to employ me without references. But I forgot that, as I forgot my want of certificates. I am—respectable." She smiled sadly. "But I am afraid I have no one who would vouch for me."

There was a pause.

"I wish I could tell you my whole story! A week or two ago I was rich, or thought myself so; but I discovered, quite suddenly, that I had been under a delusion. I left my home and came to London. The few friends I possess do not know where I am. I am," she smiled again, "proud. I could not be a burden on my friends. If they—one of them, at least—knew that I had lost all my money she would insist upon my sharing her small means. I could not do that. I am young and strong, and I ought to be able to earn my own living."

The little woman got up and paced up and down, with her hands behind her, like a man—or a school-mistress.

"What am I to do?" she said. "I believe every word you've said—"

"Yes, it is quite true," murmured Claire.

"I should like to have you come and help me, and I—yes, I would take you without references. But what would the Board say? I can't do it!"

"I know!" said Claire in a low voice, which she tried to keep steady. "And though you can not let me come, I am very grateful to you for wishing to help me—for believing and trusting in me."

"Don't cry!" said the school-mistress, sharply, as if she were chiding a girl.

"I am not crying," said Claire, passing her hand quickly over her eyes. "But yours are the first words of kindness, yours is the first offer of help, since I came to London, and—I will go now. Good-bye;" she held out her hand.

Miss Gover still paced up and down, with her head bent, a frown upon her face.

"It sounds impossible!" she exclaimed. "Surely you have some person—one person—who will answer for you?"

Claire shook her head sadly.

"There is no one to whom I could apply without letting them know how low I have fallen; and I will not do that while I have a shilling left; I have not many. If I can not get a situation as a governess or a teacher, I will find some work to do for which references are not necessary."

The mistress sighed.

"I am very sorry!" she said, regretfully. "Come, think! Is there no one who will answer for you?"

"No," said Claire.

"Yes, I will answer for her," said a low voice at the end of the room.

Both women started, and looked round. In the darkness which had gathered while they had been talking, stood the figure of a Sister of Mercy.

It was Sister Agnes. She had entered the room in her noiseless way, and, unseen, had heard the last part of the conversation. She stood perfectly motionless, with her hands folded before her, her colorless face as placid and emotionless as that of a mediæval saint.

"Sister Agnes!" exclaimed Miss Gover. Claire looked at the black-robed woman, who had come to her aid, in silent suspense.

"You know Miss Sartoris, sister?" asked the mistress.

Sister Agnes came slowly toward them.

"I will answer for her," she said. "I know nothing

her history, but I live in the same house with her. I have seen her and heard her speak."

Something in the low, patient voice touched Claire to the heart, and, trembling, she sunk into a chair. The sister's eyes rested upon her with infinite pity and tenderness.

"Are you satisfied?" she asked of the mistress.

Miss Gover nodded.

"Of course, if you will act as a reference, Sister Agnes, I am satisfied; and so also will the Board be." She turned to Claire. "Sister Agnes is the best-known person in this district, and any one she vouched for would be accepted."

Claire rose and tried to speak, but the words of gratitude would not come. Sister Agnes laid her hand upon Claire's arm. The touch was as soft and light as a snow-flake, but there was something mesmeric in it, and it stilled Claire's throbbing heart.

"You had better come to-morrow morning, at half past eight," said Miss Gover, "so that we may have time to talk matters over and arrange your duties. You will find the work hard"—she sighed, and the lines deepened on her brow—"but it will not be unpleasant, if you grow to like it. The girls are troublesome sometimes, but they are nearly all good-hearted and do their best."

"I am not afraid of hard work," said Claire. "I will try *my* very best. Not only for my own sake, but"—she looked through her tears at Sister Agnes—"but for yours."

"Come home now, my child!" said the sister; and with bent head and folded hands she led the way.

"I want to thank you," said Claire, when they got outside, "but I can not; my heart is too full. I will tell you all my story."

The sister raised her meek eyes, and smiled almost reproachfully.

"That would not be thanking me," she said. "I do not want you to justify my trust in you. You shall tell me your story some day, but not now, my dear child. Go home and rest, so that you may gain strength for the work you are starting on to-morrow. Do not be afraid. That little woman's heart is bigger than her body; it is only her manner that is hard. Behind it is a nature as soft and loving as that which you hide behind the mask of pride."

Claire hung her head.

"Beware of pride, my child! Friends were given us that *we* might make use of their friendship, for their good as well as *our* own."

"If you knew!" faltered Claire.

"I do not blame you, though I do not know all. I can see that you have suffered, that you are still in trouble. There is no balm for an aching heart like work. I speak from sad and sweet experience. Our ways part here; I am going to see a sick child for whom even work is ending." As she spoke, she touched Claire's arm again and passed away like a shadow.

Claire went home, but she could not rest. It seemed to her as if an angel from heaven in the form of Sister Agnes had come forward to help her. It seemed too wonderful to be true. She went out after awhile and bought two or three school-books, and studied them late into the night. She could scarcely sleep for thinking of this great good fortune, of the kindness of the two women; but she was at the school next morning before the clock had chimed half past eight. Miss Gover received her kindly, but in a business-like way. She explained the school routine, and, so to speak, put Claire through her paces, and Claire blushed with delight when Miss Gover said, curtly:

"There will be no difficulty about your examination; you will pass easily enough!"

At nine o'clock the girls came trooping in, and Claire's duties commenced. She had a class of fifteen girls. They were, of course, the smallest of the children, but Claire almost felt afraid of them, they seemed all so preternaturally sharp, and they eyed her with that peculiar acuteness which London children alone possess. Claire was astonished at their quickness and shrewdness, and was rather aghast at the readiness with which they seized upon any salient fact in the lesson; their intelligence was as sharp as a razor. Deeply occupied as she was, she found time to observe Miss Gover. The head mistress was a born mistress; and as Claire looked at her, she thought of Napoleon—ridiculous as the parallel may seem. The little woman held all the girls—some of them bigger than herself—as completely in hand as a general holds his division. At a word from her or a stroke of her bell, the whole school instantly became silent; she seemed to have eyes for everything and every one, and though Claire never met her glance, she knew that Miss Gover was watching her.

The room grew hot, Claire's head began to ache with that peculiar ache which the school-teacher alone knows, but she was not daunted. She liked the work; she was interested in the girls. One little mite, a child with short, fair hair,

clustering in curls about her little round head, won her heart from the start. She was called Tiny, and was at the bottom of the class. She grew tired after awhile, and Claire took her upon her knees, where the child promptly fell asleep.

At twelve o'clock the school broke up for the dinner-time, and Claire went over to Miss Gover and timidly asked how she, Claire, had got on.

"Oh, very well," said Miss Gover; "but I noticed that you took one of the children on your lap."

"She was a wee, little thing," said Claire, "and very tired."

"Yes, I know," said Miss Gover. "But you mustn't do it. You've got to learn that a school-teacher is supposed to have no heart. Oh, yes, I think you'll do very well. You've got a headache, of course?"

Claire admitted the soft impeachment. "But it will be all right when I am used to it," she said.

"Do you think so?" said Miss Gover, with a weary little smile. "Well, perhaps it may. You look very strong;" and she glanced at the graceful, girlish figure with a reluctant admiration not untinged with amiable envy.

"Oh, I'm as strong as a horse!" said Claire, with a smile.

"You need be!" rejoined the head mistress, significantly.

Day followed day, and Claire settled down into her new life. Few careers are as uneventful as a school-teacher's; but Claire did not find her life monotonous. She was interested in her work, and, except for the headaches, which grew less frequent after a time, she kept her health. In a very short time she succeeded in winning the affection of her class. The children went home full of the kindness of the new, pretty mistress; the little Tiny regarded her as a second mother; for though Claire did not repeat the mistake of nursing her, she was especially gentle with the mite who ought to have been in the nursery instead of a school.

Claire devoted her evenings to preparation for her examination, and at times she felt sure of passing. Now and again, when she was poring over Euclid, or Macaulay's "History of England," she would stop and ask herself if Court Regna and her old life had ever been a reality. If—if Gerald Wayre had ever existed? She thought of him very often—of his struggles, his cheerfulness, his self-reliance, the masterful way in which he had tackled the work at the Court; and, in a singular way, his character influenced hers.

But she had not much time for thought; there was the ordi-

nary routine work at the school every day; her own preparation for the examination every night.

Of Sister Agnes she saw very little. Now and again she would pass her on the stairs or meet her in the street, but the sister never vouchsafed her more than a smile, the placid smile of a saint, and Claire did not venture to address her, to intrude upon her. For there was something in Sister Agnes, with all her humility and sweetness, which kept people at arm's-length.

One day Claire missed Tiny from the class.

"Where is Tiny?" she asked.

"Tiny's ill, teacher," said one of the girls. After the school was over, Claire obtained Tiny's address and went round to see the child. She found the mother in tears. Tiny was very bad! Doctor said it was some fever; mother didn't know rightly which. Yes, the lady could see the child. Tiny was always talking about her. Claire went up the narrow staircase and into a small room, where the little mite lay tossing on a bed almost as small as herself. Tiny did not know her at first, but after a time understood that it was the pretty teacher, and lisped fragments of the last lessons she had learned.

Claire sat beside her for some time, and when she rose to leave, gathered the child to her bosom and kissed her. The next day Claire had a return of the headaches which she had flattered herself she had grown out of. When she got home she felt giddy and faint. She went to bed with a parching throat, and a choking sensation, which was more than unpleasant. Then, at last, she fell asleep, and woke to find Sister Agnes beside her.

"Sister Agnes!" she said, with difficulty. "You—here?"

"Yes," said Sister Agnes. "I am here because you want me. You are ill!"

"Ill?" said Claire; and her voice sounded strangely in her own ears. "What is the matter with me?"

"Diphtheria, my child," said Sister Agnes. "You caught it from Tiny!"

"Poor little Tiny! I remember!" murmured Claire.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CLAIRE was very ill. More than once grim Death hovered very near the bed on which she lay like a flower struck down by a blast of some deadly wind; but there was an angel present in the form of Sister Agnes, and she fought King Death

as the Angel of Life in Watts' great picture fights with the Destroyer—and she kept him at bay.

Providence tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, and often raises up friends for us in our hour of need; it raised up friends for poor Claire. Not only Sister Agnes, but Mrs. Holland, the landlady, and Queenie were moved to pity and tenderness. Miss Gover herself came round, and, though she dared not enter the sick-room for fear of carrying contagion to the school, spent many a half-holiday on a chair on the little landing outside the sick-room door, from which she would address, in a curiously and comically softened voice, words of encouragement to Clair within; and when Claire would try to answer her, the sharp, little woman would struggle with a lump in her throat, and dash her hand across her keen eyes.

In diphtheria the fever is seldom delirious, and Claire neither raved nor rambled incoherently; so that Sister Agnes learned nothing of her patient's past life; but she knew that the trouble which had cast Claire from wealth to poverty, and driven her into a lonely fight with the world, was still weighing upon her mind, and helping the insidious disease. The doctor, one of those hard-working men who are an honor to their profession and the salt of the earth, more than once shook his head gravely, and, outside the door, expressed to Sister Agnes his doubts as to the result of the illness.

"I might fight the diphtheria," he said; "her youth and her strength—for she is a splendid specimen of a young woman—help me, but she herself doesn't do much in that way; she doesn't appear particularly anxious to live!"

"She has known trouble," said Sister Agnes.

"Of course," said the doctor, looking at his watch—he had about fifty other cases to see that day—"I guessed that. Now, if you could cure the trouble, Sister Agnes, I think, mind, I *think*, I could pull her through the diphtheria. It's precious hard for us doctors when a sick person has something wrong with his mind as well as his body. Sorrow kills more often than disease. Go on with the treatment."

Sister Agnes went back to Claire and smoothed the pillow and bathed the hot head, and Claire smiled up at her patiently and gratefully.

"Does he say I am going to die?" she asked, one day.

"No," said Sister Agnes. "He thinks that you will live—if you care to."

Claire smiled again, a smile that went to Sister Agnes's heart. "I should like to live through it for your sake, sister," she said. "But for my own—ah, well, life does not

seem so very precious that one should fight and struggle for it. How is Tiny to-day?"

"Better," said Sister Agnes. "She cried when they told her that you were ill."

"Poor little mite!" said Claire. "I am sorry they told her. I am glad that she is better, and hope that she will live; all her life is before her, with hope and love and happiness."

"You speak as if love and happiness were over for you, dear," said Sister Agnes, gently.

"I think they are," said Claire. "That must sound very wicked to you, sister; very childish and peevish. You are so good, you see, and I am so wicked and impatient."

"Don't say that I am good," said Sister Agnes.

Claire smiled. "You are too good for this world, sister. Some persons are born so. I am not one of them."

"Don't say that!" said Sister Agnes, again. "You speak as if your trouble had left some bitterness in your heart."

"Yes," said Claire. "It has; I am no saint. My pride and self-love have been wounded, and the wound rankles."

"Can you tell me your trouble?" asked Sister Agnes, after a pause. "I know that you have not always been poor; but, my dear, riches are not everything in this world."

"Riches!" said Claire. "You think that I am grieving for the loss of my money? I am not."

She was silent for a time. During her fever her feelings had gone through a strange phase. There were times when she had forgotten Gerald's supposed treachery, when she had forgotten his flight with Lucy Hawker. They came back upon her now in full force.

"It is not the loss of my money that has hurt me," she said. "I am almost ashamed to tell you—"

"There need be no shame, dear," said Sister Agnes. "Sorrow is only shameful when we have brought it upon us by our own sin; and even then there is no shame in owning our fault and praying for forgiveness."

Claire smiled half bitterly. "I don't know that it was all my fault," she said. "If it was a sin to love him and believe in him, half the sin is mine still. I did love him, and that I can no longer believe in him is my great sorrow. Sister, are all men liars?"

"Not all," said Sister Agnes. "Thank God, there are many, many good men and true in the world. The clergyman who came to see you yesterday—"

"The little curate with the weak eyes and the thin hair?" said Claire. "How kind he was, how gentle!"

"Yes," said Sister Agnes, "and he is as noble—for all his weak eyes and thin hair—as he is gentle. He left a home of wealth and luxury—sacrificed all that the world considers worth living for—to come here and labor for the good of his fellow-men."

"He was quite different," said Claire in a low voice. "He was tall and strong, and fought for his own hand. I think that is one reason why I loved him. He was quite unlike your pet curate, sister; and, perhaps, you would not think him a hero. But he was a hero in my eyes, and I gave him all my heart."

"He must have been a very foolish as well as a very wicked man, my dear, if he didn't value it as one of the greatest treasures on earth."

Claire laughed and struggled for breath. "He valued it so little that he went off with another girl! Ah, how mean, how miserable my story must seem to you, sister! But there it is. He told me that he loved me, and five minutes afterward I saw him— It all sounds so impossible! So impossible that while I have been lying here I have forgotten his treachery, and at times have only remembered him as I once thought him—all that was noble, and good, and brave, and true."

Sister Agnes took the hot hand and smoothed it. "You must not talk much more, dear," she said. "But one word—are you sure that you were not mistaken? You do not seem to me a girl easily deceived."

"No," said Claire. "I prided myself on my intelligence. I thought that I could not be mistaken in him; that was where I was wrong. But 'men are deceivers ever,' you know, sister. No, there could be no mistake! I saw him with my own eyes making love—oh, how I hate the word!—to the other girl."

The hot tears welled from beneath her eyelids. "All this must seem so petty, so contemptible to you, sister; though it means so much to me."

Sister Agnes was silent for a moment or two, then she drew the black veil a little over her face. "Neither mean nor contemptible, dear!" she said in a low voice. "You speak as if I did not know what love meant. You are wrong. Is there any woman who is so ignorant? I, too, have had my sorrow. It has cast a shadow over my life—a shadow that is taken this form;" she touched her black dress.

Claire turned her head, but the pale, patient face was hidden from her.

"You, sister?" she breathed, half fearfully.

"Yes, I!" said Sister Agnes. "It is hard for you to realize that I, an old woman with white hair, was once a young girl like yourself."

"No, no, sister!" murmured Claire.

"It is hard for even me to realize it," said Sister Agnes, "for the past grows dim as a dream. And yet, while you have been speaking, it has all come back so vividly. You have told me something of your trouble; shall I tell you of mine?"

"Not if it will pain you," said Claire.

"It will pain me," said Sister Agnes. "But I shall not shrink from that if I can remind you that you are not the only one who has suffered, if I can show you that there is some consolation for those who seek it rightly. It is in the hour of our direst need, when life seems a hideous mockery, and death our only refuge, that God points out to us a path which leads to peace. Listen, Claire. Close your eyes, dearest; do not look at me, for in my sorrow there is, if not actual sin, the shadow of shame."

Claire stretched out her hand and sought the sister's thin one. Sister Agnes was silent for a moment or two, then the gentle, patient voice went on:

"Claire, I was an only daughter, the child of God-fearing people. My father was a clergyman, one of those who have inherited the old Puritan spirit. I was brought up strictly—too strictly. Innocence is a good thing, Claire, but, like most good things, if carried to extremes, it becomes an evil and a danger. I was shielded in our secluded parsonage from all knowledge of the great world, whose echo even never reached the vicarage gates. I knew nothing of men, of their evil natures, or of their good. My knowledge, or, rather, say my ignorance, was bounded by the little village that ran to the sea-shore. I was very happy—happy and content helping my father with the sick and needy in his parish—with the simple duties that fall to the parson's daughter."

Claire pressed her hand. "I can see you, sister," she whispered.

"One day I was standing on the little quay, when a yacht sailed in. I was thinking how beautiful she looked—like a bird spreading its wings upon the water. A gentleman came on shore from her. A stranger was rare in our quiet place. I stood and looked at him with natural curiosity and interest.

Pernaps that attracted his attention; he raised his hat and spoke to me. I remember even now the commonplace words he said. He said that it was a fine day, and he asked me to direct him to the inn. I told him the way, and thought that he would leave me at once; but he lingered, and we talked still further. He was young and handsome, and he spoke with all the ease of a man of the world. I had never met such a being before; all the men I knew were stiff and awkward; this man was grace itself. He treated me as if I were an uncrowned queen, with a deference and gentleness that thrilled through me like a warm ray of sunlight."

"I know—I know!" murmured Claire.

"When he had gone, I stood there bewildered, feeling as if something had come into my life and gone out of it, leaving me poorer than before. I went home half dazed. And I lay awake all that night thinking of him."

"I know!" said Claire, again.

"The next day I met him again. He came down the narrow lane humming a song, which ceased as he saw me; his face lighted up with a smile, which mine, I knew, reflected. We walked side by side and talked. Even now I can remember every word he said, every look on his face. Every day for a week we met; at first by chance, afterward by agreement; and before the week was over he had become to me dearer than father and mother—than life itself."

"Oh, I understand!" breathed Claire. "It might be my own story."

Sister Agnes drew a long breath.

"At last he told me that he loved me, and asked me to be his wife. I tried to resist, but something drew me to him, and I hid my face upon his breast, while he drew a confession of my love from me. But I was not wholly forgetful of my father and my home. I reminded him that I did not even know his name, that he was a stranger to me and mine. He laughed—whenever he laughed something within my heart laughed, too, and dispelled all doubt and fear."

"Yes," said Claire. "When *he* laughed I felt like that."

"He told me his name and rank. He was a nobleman; I was frightened, for I knew that between him and me, the daughter of a poor clergyman, there must be a great gulf. He laughed my fears away. He said he would go to my father and ask for me with all proper ceremony. We went home together. He saw my father. What passed between *them* I do not know, but my father came to me and told me *but the man I loved was not fit to be my husband.*"

She was silent a moment, and Claire felt the thin, wasted hand tremble.

"My father said that he was a profligate, a man of well-known bad character, and that nothing but unhappiness for me could result from our marriage. I pleaded hard, but my father was inexorable. That my lover was a man of wealth and rank weighed nothing with him. If I had fallen in love with our village carpenter, a respectable member of our church, my father would have consented to our union; but he would not give his daughter to a man of loose life, though he were the king of England. There was a stormy scene. I heard my father's and my lover's voices raised in anger and defiance—"

There was a pause. So vividly had the sister's simple narrative depicted the scene, that Claire almost saw it.

"My lover left the house," resumed Sister Agnes, "and I was bidden to see him no more; but I could not obey. I, whose will and wish had hitherto been those of my father's, felt a force stronger than filial piety impelling me. I stole out of the house that night and met my lover."

She paused, as if the memory of the past were casting a spell upon her.

"He owned that my father had just cause for doubting his sincerity, but he swore that he loved me, and he implored me to fly with him and be his wife. I resisted for days, but a woman's heart is weak when it is o'erbrimming with love. I forgot the duty I owed my father; I forgot everything in the passion which consumed me like fire, and at last I consented to a clandestine marriage. You blame me, Claire?"

"No," breathed Claire. "If the man I loved had said to me, 'Come with me to the end of the earth,' I must have gone—if I had not discovered his treachery."

"We are all alike," said Sister Agnes in a low voice. "Sometimes, in my presumption, I have asked myself why God made women so subject to man, so fully his slave. To avert suspicion, he sailed away in his yacht, but he came back a week or two later, and the yacht lay off the port. I had agreed to steal from my home and join him on board. That night I rose from my bed and dressed myself, and while the father who loved me lay asleep, trusting me and suspecting nothing, I stole from the house, and, going down to the quay, found a boat waiting for me. Even then a presentiment of coming evil smote me like a cold wind, and I would have drawn back and returned to the safety of a father's love, but my lover and my love were too strong. As I hesitated, he

took me in his arms and carried me into the boat, and we rowed to the yacht."

"Sister!" whispered Claire.

"He had brought a woman with him—a faithful and devoted servant, who had been his nurse. He had thought of everything that could insure my safety and soothe my conscience. No man could have been more gentle, more chivalrous than he was. If it had been possible, I should have loved him more deeply during that voyage than I had done before. Think of it, Claire! To sail on sunlit seas with the man to whom one's whole heart has been given; to lie back on a chair on a snow-white deck, with snow-white sails above one's head, and listen to words made musical by love! We reached a foreign port, and there, quietly, privately, but with all due form, we were married."

Claire unconsciously drew a breath of relief.

"Yes, married," said Sister Agnes. "He loved me well enough—then—to make me his wife. He loved me well enough—then."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SHE paused in her narrative, and her head bent lower.

"We traveled on the Continent some months. My husband was a singular man, and disliked society. None of his relatives, and, indeed, very few of his friends, if any, were aware of our marriage. He seemed to shun acquaintances, and we lived for the greater part of the time in an old Swiss town. I was quite content and very happy, and did not feel the need of friends while he was by my side and I had his love. For a time we lived an idyllic life; the life of two persons who love each other, and are satisfied with their love. If I had been a woman of the world, instead of an ignorant, unsophisticated girl, I should have known that such a life could not last; but I knew nothing of the world, nothing of men—our masters. I was living in a Fool's Paradise, and did not understand that the existence which seemed so perfect to me would soon begin to pall upon him.

"All his life had been spent in pleasure, every whim had been gratified, and it was not likely that a life of sweet monotony would satisfy him. It was wonderful that he was contented for so long. For some months he scarcely left me, but presently he began to go by himself to the nearest town. There was a club there, and he met men, who, like himself, were devoted to pleasure. At first I was glad that he should

find some amusement and change outside our quiet existence, and I encouraged him to make frequent visits to the town, little thinking that I was with my own hand weakening the slender links of the chain which bound him to me. After a time his absences were more frequent and longer; he would stay away for a night or two; at first with many excuses and plausible reasons, but gradually with no excuse at all. Little by little the truth began to dawn upon me—that truth which is the most bitter a woman can learn—that the man she loves is growing weary of her.”

Claire's hand closed over the sister's and pressed it.

“Don't tell me any more, sister!” she said.

“Yes,” returned the low, patient voice. “I want you to know why I can sympathize with you. I tried to hide the awful doubt and dread which was creeping over my heart like a blight. I tried to be gay and to seem as if I were still sure of his affection and feared nothing; for, innocent as I was, I knew, with a woman's sure instinct, that to complain were fatal. In a chalet near ours lived a young Italian. He lived a life almost as secluded as our own, for he was delicate, and held his life by the slenderest of threads. He had made my husband's acquaintance in an informal way, and, now and again, we had exchanged visits. He was very young, very handsome, with that kind of beauty which the shadow of death spiritualizes. He was a musician, and spent nearly all his time with his piano and violin; sometimes on still nights I could hear the sweet strains wafted through the windows of my room, in which I now spent so many solitary hours. One day he called while my husband was out; I had been crying, for my husband had been away from me three days, and I think the young fellow saw traces of my tears. He was very gentle, though he affected not to have noticed that anything was wrong, but after he had been talking for a little while, he went to the piano and played and sung to me. It was as if some friend had laid a soothing hand upon my heart; he got up from the piano and went without a word; but the next day he came again, and the next, and the next; indeed, there was scarcely a day on which he did not cross the grounds and enter by the long, open window; and if he did not come, I missed him. Are you thinking ill of me, dear?”

“No, no!” murmured Claire.

“There is no need,” said Sister Agnes, simply. “I meant *no ill, thought no ill*. I still loved my husband with all my heart, and the young Italian was to me like a brother or a dear friend—just that, and no more. My husband did not

seem to notice the frequency of his visits. I know now that he was growing indifferent to me and all that concerned me. Sometimes he came home hot and flushed with drink and the excitement of the gaming-table, and finding us together, would vouchsafe us a nod and a few careless words, and go straight to his own room. The young Italian, young as he was, knew more of the world than I did; he was a man with a man's knowledge of other men's lives. Rumors of my husband's manner of amusing himself reached his ears—he knew that my husband's fickle fancy had been caught by a fresh face, and that he spent most of his time when away from me with a woman of notorious ill-fame. The young Italian pitied me. Pity is akin to love, and he grew"—she drew her hand away from Claire's, and clasped her other one in it—"he grew to love me. As Heaven is my witness, I saw, suspected nothing. I scarcely noticed that his manner grew more gentle, more tender; that the music he played and the songs he sung thrilled with the accents of passion. How should I? I still loved my husband. But I suppose my husband's eyes were keener than mine. The evil men do makes them quick to discern evil in others. One day he hinted his suspicion. I did not understand him at first, and when I did, I was indignant to begin with, and then scornfully amused; in my innocence I laughed at his half-formed accusation; I even refused to relinquish the young Italian's friendship. I would not by so doing assent, as it were, to my husband's unfounded doubt. I shall never forget the way in which he received my almost defiance. 'We shall see,' he said, with a half-mocking, half-bitter smile, which had become habitual with him. 'I know men pretty well; I know women better. We shall see. But I warn you that if I should prove to be right, there will be no mercy for him or you. Go on your own sweet way, but remember I have warned you!' I was so sure of my friend's innocence and my own, that I sent over to the châlet next day to ask him to come and play to me. He came; he looked paler and more delicate than usual, and was very silent. After a time he went to the piano, but in the middle of the song he broke down, rose, and came across the room to me and knelt at my feet. He told me that he loved me, that he knew I was unhappy, that my husband was deserting me for a woman not fit to breathe the same air; and he asked me, implored me, to fly with him. He said that such a marriage as mine was a mockery and a degradation, that I had every right to leave the man who was giving me; he said that he would make me his wife the

moment the law enabled him to do so. He had not long to live, but while he lived his life should be devoted to me; he was rich and noble; he would leave me to friends who would care for and watch over me. It was true love he offered me, but I shrunk in horror and remorse—remorse that my husband should have been right and I so blind and wrong. I implored him to leave me; I told him that what he proposed was impossible, that I still loved my husband, and that even if I did not, I should remain a true wife to the end. He clung to my dress, and in passionate accents implored me to save myself and fly with him. While he was still on his knees a shadow fell across the floor, and my husband entered."

There was a pause; the ticking of the clock on the mantel-shelf sounded in Claire's ears like a human voice crying in sharp accents of agony. Sister Agnes drew a long breath.

"I was like one turned to stone; I could not speak, urge my innocence, utter one word. The young Italian rose, white and panting. My husband looked from him to me with a smile of bitter amusement. 'I told you so,' he said in a voice which I had learned to know so well, and to dread. 'Time has proved me right! May I ask whether you have completed your preparations for departure with your lover, and whether I can be of any assistance to you? Pray command me! I am quite at your service, believe me.'

"I quailed and shrunk before the insult, more deadly and crushing than any outburst of fury; but it drove the young Italian mad. He sprang across the room and struck my husband on the face. My husband stood like a rock, and the smile never left his lips.

"'Thanks!' he said. 'But for this blow I would have let you go unpunished; but this makes my course delightfully easy. You will find my second awaiting you on your return home; but, pray, do not let me hurry you. You two will still have a great deal to say to each other, and, with all apologies for such an impertinent intrusion, I take my leave.' I heard no more, for I fell in a faint. I was ill for weeks, unconscious most of the time. A child was born to me during that time. When I was well enough to be told the truth, I learned that my little one was dead."

Her voice broke with sob for an instant, and Claire's tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Afterward they told me that the man who had loved me *so madly, and pitied me so tenderly, had been killed by my husband. He had declared my innocence, my complete ignorance of his love, my perfect blamelessness; but my*

band had laughed incredulously and believed me guilty. The loss of my child, the murder my husband had committed—for it was no less than murder—nearly killed me. I prayed to die night after night, as others pray to live; but God, in His mercy and in His pity, would not hear me. When I grew stronger they brought me a letter from my husband. It was as courteous as if it had come from a lawyer or a friend. He would never see me again; I should remain his wife on one condition—that I should never bear his name. If I would consent to this proposal he would make me a liberal allowance; if not, he would sue for a divorce, and bring shame upon me and my widowed mother."

"Can such men exist?" said Claire.

"Yes," responded Sister Agnes, "and women make them what they are. I wrote to my husband and told him that I would never bear his name again, that I would accept no help from him; and I sent him my wedding-ring."

"Yes, yes!" murmured Claire. "And then?"

"Then I began my new life. I had very little money and no friends. I could not go home; I knew nothing of the world with which I had to fight—how hard a fight that is you have learned, dear. There were days when I tasted no food; there have been nights when I have lain awake with the cold. I have lived with the poorest of the poor, the most wretched of the wretched, and I have found that there were sorrows deeper than mine, anguish more keen than even I had suffered. I found heroes and heroines in the gutters, martyrs in the slums. I came of an old Puritan stock, Claire, and my heart, which I thought had been frozen or turned to stone, melted at the sight of so much misery. Ah, dear, if the rich only knew! It is not because they are so unfeeling that so little is done for the poor; it is because they do not *know*. One day I was taking some needle-work home to the man who kept a host of slaves like myself—slaves more wretched and more cruelly treated than any in foreign lands, to free whom we spend so many millions. I was ill and half starved, and I fainted on the way. When I came to, a Sister of Mercy was bending over me. She took me to the Home. It was rightly called; for it was a Home. To me it was a haven of rest and peace. Some day, Claire, the world—this great Babylon of ours—will learn to know and value the work the Sisters of the Poor and Needy have done and are doing. It is too apt to sneer and laugh at our black garb; it does not understand that we wear it as a uniform which we have taught the steeled and the miserable to respect and love. I told the

sisters my story, concealing the names, as I have concealed them from you. They asked me to join them; I consented willingly, gratefully. The day I put on the sister's dress I left the past behind me, relinquished in very truth the name my husband had given me, and became—Sister Agnes."

There was silence while one could count twenty, then she went on:

"I have told you this, dear, because I wanted you to know that there are others who have suffered more keenly perhaps than you have done; because I wanted you to know and feel why I could sympathize with you."

"Oh, I am ashamed!" said Claire. "Ashamed, ashamed! What is my trouble compared with yours? I know, now, how wicked I have been to repine, to think that I was more cruelly used than all other women. Sister, forgive me! I, too, have prayed to die, have longed for death, but I will do so no longer. Not now. Help me to get well, sister!"

"I have not told you my story in vain, dear?" said Sister Agnes, with tears in her eyes.

"No!" said Claire. "I shall remember it as long as I live. Whenever I am tempted to think of my lost money, of—of—*him*, I shall remember what you have suffered, and shall feel scorn and contempt for my own trouble, which is so small and petty compared with yours. It was so dreadful! And, of it all, the worst seems to me—" she paused, and laid her hand on Sister Agnes's arm. "Your little child—"

She felt the sister's arm tremble.

"Did you never hear any more of it?"

"They took me to see its grave," said Sister Agnes, almost inaudibly. "It was a nameless grave in a large cemetery. If it had lived— But it is wicked to repine. My little one has gone to heaven, and I am left to help other little ones to that blessed home and to Him who said, 'Suffer the little ones to come unto me.' Sometimes I dream that he lives, that he is a great, strong man, as brave and fearless as his father; but a good man. I can almost see his face, hear his voice, as they would be if he were still alive. Then I wake to remember that he is dead, and that I am—Sister Agnes."

"And you have never seen your husband since?" asked Claire.

"Never," replied Sister Agnes. "I heard that his health had broken down, that he had gone to live in seclusion at his *ancestral home*. I told you that he was a nobleman and very *wealthy*."

"Then you are a lady of title?" said Claire.

"Yes," she said. "I am the wife of a man who bears one of the oldest titles in England. You must not ask me what it is, dear child."

"No, no!" said Claire, quickly.

"When I took the vow of our sisterhood, I passed from the world—left it behind. It is dead to me. If I could, I would forget that I have been anything but Sister Agnes. Indeed, at times, the past seems like a dream to me—a real dream, from which those few minutes in which I saw and knew my child, alone stand out distinctly."

"Dear, dear sister!" said Claire.

She was silent for a moment or two, then she said: "This sisterhood, sister, can I not join it? Would they take me?" eagerly.

Sister Agnes turned her face for the first time, and smiled as she shook her head.

"No, my child. Only they who have done with the world—who can turn their backs upon it with a sure and certain conviction that they will not even be tempted to look behind, can tread the path which we walk."

"I—" began Claire.

Sister Agnes smiled and shook her head again. "No, dear, you can not say that. I know you better than you know yourself. Your place is in the world still."

"You mean that I am stubborn and proud!" said Claire, half rebelliously.

"Stubborn, no; but proud, yes," said Sister Agnes. "Your hold on life and life's possibilities is still strong. Besides, my child, there would be some danger—" she paused, and looked at Claire with tender admiration. "You are very beautiful, dear. Some day, some man—God grant he may be good and true—will see this fair face of yours and try to win your love."

Claire shrunk.

"No, no!" she said. "Not that! I have no heart left, no love to give. I have done with all that, sister; I shall never love again. You call me proud; I have been deceived once. I am too proud—yes, too proud—ever to love again. But if I can not join your sisterhood—and you know better than I do, sister—I can fight my way. I want to get well now. As I said, I feel ashamed. I want to get well and go back to the school, and take my place in the work, and help others."

Sister Agnes bent over her and kissed her, and as she did a tear fell on Claire's face.

"I will help you, dear," she said. "I don't know why it is, my child, but you have grown very dear to me."

"That's because you've nursed me," said Claire, shrewdly. "They say we always grow fond of those whom we help."

"I think we do," said Sister Agnes in her sweet voice. "But even that will not account for it," she added, with a smile, as she smoothed the silken hair from Claire's white brow. "I have nursed many, have sat beside numberless sick-beds, but have never felt as I have felt toward you. Sometimes I have feared that I have been wrong in cherishing my fondness for you, that I have been tempted to neglect my duties to others; but you are just the one ewe lamb to me."

The gentle voice lowered and the tears gathered in the sad, patient eyes.

"I don't know why it is! It is not because you are so pretty—beware of beauty, my child, it's perils are many—but as I have sat beside you, while you have been lying there so helpless, so lonely, somehow the thought of my child, the little one who was taken from me, has come to me, and I have seen my baby grown up, strong. I don't know why this is, for you are a girl, and he would have been a man if he had lived. But all the love which wells up in my heart for him has flown toward you."

Claire stretched out her white arms and wound them round the sister's neck.

"Love me still, Sister Agnes!" she said, with a sob. "Try to think that I am your daughter. Oh, I wish I were!"

* * * * *

About this time Gerald was beginning to hobble about with a stick, and wonder what was to become of him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

GERALD's broken leg did not take very long mending, but it seemed an age to him, and his language, when the doctor insisted upon his keeping the injured limb in a horizontal position long after Gerald considered any precaution of that kind unnecessary, is scarcely fit for publication.

Terence, the woodman, behaved—like an Irishman; that is to say, he treated Gerald as a brother, and nursed him like a woman, making light of the trouble, and declaring that he *was more than repaid* by the pleasure of Gerald's company; *and he found it difficult to persuade Terence into allowing him to chop wood and make fagots, which Gerald could presently*

manage in a sitting position, and without retarding the recovery of his leg.

While thus employed, he had plenty of time to think of Claire, and he thought of her almost without ceasing. Her coldness—almost heartlessness—amazed and bewildered him. That she should, in sending him the check, barely express her regret at the accident seemed so unlike her, that he could scarcely believe his senses; and he used, at ever meal-time, to take out Mordaunt Sapley's letter and stare at it as one stares at a Chinese puzzle. And when he did so, he tried to call her all the names which men bestow upon women when they have proved deceitful and unkind. But it was of no use; he loved her still, and actually endeavored to find excuses for her. He told himself that she had done quite right, that it was like his confounded impudence to fall in love with her, and that he had only got what he deserved. Then he would kiss the glove which he had found in the chapel, and thrust it into his bosom again at the sound of Terence's footsteps.

As his leg got well and strong again he asked himself what he was going to do. There was not enough work in the wood for a permanent extra hand, and he could not remain a burden on Terence. He must go on the tramp, and find some kind of employment.

Consequently, one morning he packed his bag, cut himself a stout stick, and, after breakfast, announced his intention of starting. Terence remonstrated and pleaded in vain—he even offered to toss whether Gerald should remain or go—and at last, with a sorrowful countenance, recognized that Gerald's resolution was immovable, and thrusting a closely packed tobacco-pouch in his hand—it was the only gift he dared venture on—wished him God-speed.

"Shure, and the days will be long widout yez, and the nights longer!" he said, sorrowfully. "I niver had a mate I liked better, for, barring ye're a gintleman, there's divil a bit o' fault to find wid yez!"

"I'm sorry enough to go, Terence," said Gerald, gripping the man's rough hand. "You have been a brother to me; but, you see—well, I must go."

The two men looked into each other's eyes in silence for a full minute, and then parted; and Gerald went on his way with that dull little ache in his heart, and "as one that sorroweth deeply."

"If ever I have any luck," he muttered to himself, "I'll find Terence the best axes Sheffield can turn out."

But though he grieved at parting with this true friend, he

was not very much cast down on his own account. There are some men who believe in their luck, or their "star," and Gerald was one of them. He had always fallen on his feet, however great and disastrous the tumble happened to be, and his heart was full of courage. For, after all, how little a strong man needs! For breakfast, a cup of coffee and a loaf, three halfpence; for dinner, bread, a chop, and a glass of ale, say, eightpence; for supper, bread, cheese, and another glass of ale, fourpence. There is bed to be reckoned; but in summer a man can sleep like a top in the lee of a haystack or a shed, and in winter he can earn a night's lodging in a straw loft.

And Gerald was not reduced even yet to his last coin, and he did not despair. While he had been lying by, the season had advanced, and heavy rain had fallen, so that the roads were bad and traveling was slow; but, with an occasional lift, he made pretty good progress, and he hoped to reach a large town before the close of the week. What he should do when he reached it he did not quite know, but he had several trades at his finger ends, and made no doubt that he should get employment of some kind or other.

One evening—it was the third day of his tramp—he approached a picturesque village set on a hill overlooking a small port. It occurred to him that it would be a good place to stop the night at—he was hungry and a little foot-sore—and he went on to the quay and asked a man who was lounging there the name of the place, and where he could get a lodging.

The man said the place was called Lartree, and directed him to the inn.

The name seemed familiar to Gerald, and he mumbled it over several times, as one does when trying to rouse one's memory; then, suddenly, it came to him—it was the place, the little port, from which Lord Wharton had brought the strange young lady aboard his yacht. Gerald had almost forgotten Captain Joslin's romantic story, but it came back to his mind rather vividly under the singular coincidence which had led his wandering and aimless footsteps to the very spot; and as he strode up to the inn he wondered what her name might have been, whether any of her folk were still living, whether the story of her flight was still remembered, and what had become of her.

The inn was as picturesque as the village itself, and Gerald eat his supper with a good appetite, and beside a good wood fire, which breathed comfort from every log. The landlady

herself waited on him, and as assiduously as if he had ordered the best room and a sumptuous spread, instead of a meal of bread and cheese; and Gerald, as he lighted his pipe, having still the captain's story floating through his brain, got into conversation with her. She was quite ready to talk with a handsome young man, who, though he carried a bundle and "rode on a walking-stick," was evidently a gentleman; but when Gerald began to ask questions he found that she was a comparatively new-comer, and had never heard tell of any nobleman's yacht at Lartree.

"They're most coal and stone vessels that put in here, sir," she said, "and a rough lot the men are, though they don't mean no harm, nor do any. We don't see a gentleman in these parts once in a blue moon; you must let me mix you 'a glass of toddy, sir—it's some whisky as I've had by me for nigh upon ten years—and wouldn't hurt a baby."

"I'm not afraid, thank you," said Gerald, with his pleasant smile, which called up an answering one in the round red face of the landlady.

He drank the toddy, and then, as the night was still young, sauntered out. There was a moon shining through a watery mist, but it was not raining, and Gerald, tempted by the weird beauty of the night and the romantic surroundings—Ireland is the land of romance, "from tree-top to farrow"—he strolled through the tiny village, and on to the common just beyond.

Across this common was a foot-bridge, which spanned what, in summer, was an inoffensive brook, but which in winter too often grew into a swift and ugly-looking river. The rains had swollen it into quite a formidable torrent, which rushed under the bridge and swirled round the rough wooden pillars with an angry swish. Just below the bridge was a road, through which, in summer, any one coming into or leaving Lartree drove. In flood-time they went, perforce, round by a safer and drier road. Gerald leaned over the bridge, and looked into the water musingly. As was always the way, whenever he saw anything pretty or curious, he longed to have Claire by his side—absurd and preposterous as the longing was—to share his pleasure; and to-night he longed for her rather more than usual. It is in the moonlight that "lovers' madness" always flourishes.

He was turning back to the comfort of the inn, when he heard the sound of wheels, apparently coming in the direction of the bridge. He had been long enough in the country to recognize the rattle of an Irish carriage; this was not one; and

it struck him as curious that a carriage should be making for the spot, which seemed barred to the progress of anything but a boat. He lighted another pipe and stopped where he was, to await the development of events.

A carriage came to the edge of the torrent, and there paused.

"Going to turn back," thought Gerald; but, to his amazement, the driver smacked his whip and seemed to be urging the horse forward.

"The man must be either a stranger, and ignorant of his danger, or drunk, or mad!" thought Gerald; and with the intention of warning him, he shouted as loudly as he could. But though his voice was by no means feeble, the roar of the torrent drowned it; and he started off at a sharp run across the bridge and along the path toward the carriage.

He was too late, however, for the horse, unaware of the depth, and trusting to the driver, had obediently plunged into the water, and Gerald was horrified to see him swimming and trying to stem the torrent. As he stood spellbound to the spot, a window of the carriage was let down with a bang, and a man's head was thrust out. Gerald thought he heard a woman's voice raised in a cry of alarm at the same moment, but he could not be sure.

Gerald ran into the water as far as he could, and shouted to the driver:

"You confounded idiot, come back!"

It was easy to command, but impossible for the man to obey. He was howling and swearing now as only a drunken man in such a predicament can; and the horse was being carried down the stream, despite its most frantic efforts to reach the opposite shore. Then Gerald unmistakably heard a woman's scream, and a cry of help from the man inside the carriage. The vehicle was still afloat, and, if the danger had been less, Gerald could have found something comical in the situation, but there was too much peril for laughter to come in.

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, or what he wanted to do, he tore off his boots, and plunging into the stream, let himself be swept to the carriage. So swift was the current that he was very nearly carried past the impromptu ark, but he managed to clutch the sides, and there hung helpless and incapable of help.

Suddenly a face came to the window, and so close to his own that he could feel a warm breath on his brow. It was a girl's face, white with terror, and the two eyes that looked into his in the moonlight were fixed with fear.

"All right," he shouted, after the manner of his kind. "Don't be afraid; it's all right."

It was anything but all right, and even as he shouted the assertion, the carriage struck against one of the piers, the shafts parted from the vehicle, and while the horse swam off under the bridge, snorting with terror, the carriage began to heel over.

Gerald tore open the door, and gripped something soft and warm—it was the girl's arm—and shouted:

"Come with me!"

Even if she had been inclined to remain, his strong grasp would have compelled her; and the next instant they were in the water together, Gerald's arm round her waist—and she, of course, clinging to him like grim death.

"Don't—don't clutch me, for God's sake!" he said, as he felt the arms tightening round his neck, and knew that if her terrified embrace continued they must both go down. "Take hold of my coat, and hold tight! I can't swim—do anything—if you grip me!"

She understood, or perhaps her hold shifted by accident; anyway, her small hands slipped to his coat, and Gerald was free to make a fight for it.

It is not easy to save a drowning person, however good a swimmer a man may be; if any one doubts this, let him try it in a swimming-bath, and be convinced. Gerald could swim as well as most men, and was as strong as a Grecian athlete, but he saw that the only thing to do was to go with the current, not endeavor to oppose it. So he struck out, cleared the bridge—no small danger—and drifted with the current. It swirled into an eddy just below the bridge, and he thought they would be sucked down; but he shut his teeth tight, and struck out.

Right above them the moon shone down through the thin veil of mist with an aggravating serenity and peacefulness; the trees fringing the meadows pierced through an exquisite gauze. If they were going to die, they were going to die amidst a scene of remarkable beauty, a kind of weird fairy-land—like unto the transformation scene at a theater. Even at the moment, when life seemed to be closing forever, and death unpleasantly near, Gerald could not help noticing the beautiful frame in which the tragedy was set.

"Good-bye, Claire!" he thought. "I shall never know *why you have treated me so badly.*"

Then, even as he bid her, mentally, farewell, he felt his **et strike the ground.** It is the loveliest feeling a man can

experience, if he happens to be drowning, and Gerald could not refrain a shout.

"All right," he said again; "cling on tight! We're there!"

A moment or two afterward he was standing on the meadow, stretching his arms, and drawing a long breath, and the girl was lying at his feet. He bent down and raised her, and to his surprise she opened her eyes. She was unconscious for a moment or two, then she heaved a sigh that quivered through all her frame, and, still looking at him, said:

"Are we still alive?"

"Yes, yes!" responded Gerald. "And I hope you are not hurt. Frightened, of course. But don't faint"—she had closed her eyes, and her head had sunk on his shoulder again—"for I must go and see—there was some one else in the carriage?"

"My father," she breathed, quickly. "I shall not faint. Go! oh, go!"

She sunk on to the grass, clasping her hands and peering into the mist, and Gerald ran along the edge of the stream shouting. He almost ran into the arms of a man who was shouting also:

"Grace, Grace! My daughter!"

Gerald caught him by the arm.

"Your daughter is quite safe!" he said. "Don't be alarmed."

The father was a short, thick-set man, with a strong, shrewd, weather-beaten face; and though his hair was gray, the grip he laid upon Gerald's arm had little of old age or weakness in it. "Safe! Grace safe!" he panted. "Where is she? Take me to her!"

"Come on," said Gerald. "Where's the man—that fool of a driver?"

"On shore," said the gentleman.

"Ah, Providence watches over children and drunken men," said Gerald, shortly. "Here is your daughter."

The girl fell into her father's arms, and Gerald turned his back, and wrung the superfluous water out of his clothes. Then he heard the girl say, remindingly, "Father!" and the old man turned to Gerald and held out his hand.

"My daughter owes her life to you, sir!" he said, with a catch in his voice, and tears in his eyes, which were already wet enough. "I can't thank you—"

Gerald cut in, with the usual awkwardness of the brave

man dodging a shower of thanks, with the usual commonplace:

"Don't mention it. I was standing on the bridge—luckily—and saw— But she ought not to stand there any longer; she must be wet through."

"Yes, yes!" said the father, anxiously. "Is there any place?"

"The inn is only a little way. Let me show you," said Gerald.

The old man took his daughter's arm within his; but the excitement waning, he was trembling, and almost as much in need of support as she. This Gerald saw, and held out his arm without a word. She looked at her father, and then at Gerald for an instant, then put her hand on his arm.

Gerald walked her along quickly; he knew the danger of loitering; but presently she stopped.

"I can not go so fast," she panted, her hand on her heart.

Gerald looked toward the village; it seemed a long way off, and, making no bones of the matter, he cut etiquette, and lifted her in his arms. She caught her breath, but offered no resistance, the father murmured meekly, "Thank you!" and Gerald carried her to the inn. She was very light, too light for her height, and she nestled down in his arms and on his broad breast like a tired child.

As they approached the inn, men came out with lanterns, which were quite unnecessary, shouting excitedly; and the landlady met them at the door all of a flutter of hospitable anxiety. The girl was taken from his arms, and whisked upstairs, and Gerald stood and looked round the inn-parlor, asking himself if the whole thing weren't a dream. The sight of the driver steaming in front of the fire and drinking neat whisky by the tumbler, convinced him of the reality.

Gerald addressed a few pointed remarks to this individual—which were received more with sorrow than anger—and then went to his room to change his clothes, leaving a stream of water trickling behind him.

Opening his bag for the first time since he had left the woodman's hut, he took the first suit that came to hand; it chanced—is there such a thing as chance in this strange world of ours?—to be the suit he had worn the last time he was at the Court.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHEN he came down he found the gentleman clad in a suit belonging to the landlady's son, much too large for the present wearer, seated beside the fire. He rose as Gerald entered, and held out his hand.

"Don't be afraid," he said, with a shrewd smile. "I am not going to thank you. There are some things that can't be properly thanked; what you have done to-night is one of them; but if you think I don't know that you risked your life to save ours, you make a great mistake. I know it, and my daughter knows it." His eyes—they were sharp and keen—the eyes of a man who has had to keep them pretty wide open during his way through the world—grew moist.

"I hope she is not ill!" said Gerald.

The gentleman shook his head.

"She is not strong at the best of times," he said, gravely, "and this—but we will hope for the best. But for you there would be no hope left for me by this time." He tried to repress a shudder.

"I trust she will get a good night's rest, and be all right in the morning," said Gerald. "She was very brave."

"Women—especially when they are delicate—always are," responded the father. "A woman will face things that will make a man quail. But as to a night's rest—" He shook his head. "She is all nerves. She is coming down directly."

"Is that wise?" said Gerald.

The old man laughed and sighed, but said nothing in response.

"Let me introduce myself," he said. "My name is Harling, Robert Harling. I have just returned to England from Australia—will you bring this gentleman a glass of hot whisky and water, if you please, ma'am? I shall be glad to know the name of the man to whom I owe a debt which nothing, *nothing* on earth can repay!"

"My name is Wayre—Gerald Wayre," said Gerald.

He was piling up the logs on the fire as he spoke—to make a blaze by the time the girl came down—and did not see the start which Mr. Harling gave, or the amazed expression of his face at the sound of Gerald's name.

"Wayre?" he said, with a dry cough. "Did you say Wayre? How do you spell it? You see, it's only natural I should be curious."

Gerald smiled, and spelled his name.

"Thanks," said the old gentleman, "I shall not forget it. Here's your whisky; oblige me—*oblige* me!—by drinking as much of it as you can at a gulp! And here, alas! is my daughter. My dear Grace, if you would only go to bed!"

Gerald turned and saw a strange sight—a beautiful girl, fair as a lily, with flaxen hair and blue eyes—dressed, swathed, rather, in one of the landlady's best frocks. His smile of amusement struggled with the admiration and surprise at her beauty. She stood, with downcast eyes, for a moment, the color coming and going in her face, then she raised her eyes and poured a glance of gratitude and womanly admiration of his heroism upon him. It was so intense, so magnetic, that it took Gerald's breath away, and made him—well, as awkward and embarrassed as ever a poor man can be.

"Come to the fire, Miss Harling," he said, after he had got his breath back again. "I'm afraid you ought to be in bed; but as you are here—why—why— Do you feel cold—feverish? Perhaps a doctor—"

"I am not cold—I am not anything, but—but wretched with my inability to say what I want to say. Father, you have thanked him? Have you told him that—that—we know he saved my life at the risk of his own?"

"Yes, Grace, yes!" he said. "But, like all brave men, Mr. Wayre"—he looked at her with a compression of the lips and a warning frown as he spoke the name, as if commanding her not to express surprise; but, notwithstanding this significant caution, she started slightly and glanced questioningly at Gerald, who was doing something at the bar—"Mr. Wayre refuses all thanks. Never mind. He knows."

"Have you ever tasted whisky, Miss Harling?" asked Gerald, with rather startling abruptness.

She opened her eyes upon him.

"No! Why?"

"Then—with your father's permission—you are going to taste it for the first time," he said; and he held out a glass, mixed as strong as he dared.

She looked at him and shrunk back, then she raised her eyes to his, and took the glass as meekly as a lamb.

Her father smiled.

"I might have begged and implored in vain," he said, half comically. "Thank you, Mr. Wayre. It's just what she wants."

"It is odious," she said, with a shudder. "But," with a wry smile—oh, when will women learn the power of such

a smile! But perhaps it is better for us that they should not—"I will drink it. Not all."

"I am afraid it must be all," said Gerald, firmly. "Don't be afraid. It is good whisky, and there is not a headache in a gallon of it."

"May I not have some more water?" she pleaded.

"I think not. You have had the water already, you know," he said.

She laughed—a faint, soft little laugh, like a tired child's—and leaned back, with half-closed eyes; but the half that was open—and women see so much with half an eye—was fixed on Gerald.

Mr. Harling signed to Gerald to draw his chair up to the fire.

"What about your things?" said Gerald.

"Fortunately, we only had a Gladstone bag with us," responded the old man, with the philosophical air of a man who has roughed it. "The rest is lying at the hotel at Blagford; the landlady has sent in for it. You know Blagford, of course?"

"No," said Gerald. Mr. Harling looked at him with veiled surprise, and Gerald explained: "I am a stranger here."

"A stranger?" echoed the old man, as if thrown off his guard for a moment.

"Yes," said Gerald. "I only arrived here this evening, and I am off to-morrow."

The half-open eyes opened wholly, and then closed.

"You are traveling for pleasure?" asked Mr. Harling.

Gerald stretched out his legs and smiled.

"Well, scarcely," he replied. "I am looking for employment. I am making for one of the large towns; there is more scope there than in the villages."

The old man looked at him with a kind of constrained interest.

"What is your—your business?" he asked. "Please forgive me for seeming curious. The occasion almost warrants it, doesn't it?"

"Oh, don't apologize," said Gerald in his frank way. "I've so many businesses that I'm troubled to answer; but I'm not particular as to the kind of work. I've been chopping wood for some weeks past," he added, simply.

The old man stared at him, stared at his clothes, at his face, at his hands. Once or twice in his life Gerald had been forced to wish that he was not a gentleman—or, at least, di-

not look one. To be a gentleman and poor enough to be in search of manual labor is to be suspected of all and every kind of evil. Mr. Harling looked at him gravely, his keen eyes reading Gerald's handsome face, as it were, then he smiled, as if any doubts Gerald's speech had raised were dispelled, and he, Mr. Harling, was satisfied, and he laughed.

"In the place I came from a gentleman down on his luck is always regarded with suspicion."

"Father!" said a soft voice.

"Hold on, Grace! But, I am sure that in your case—"

"Oh, I am passing honest, as Hamlet says," said Gerald, with a smile. "But I happen to be poor. It's a crime in most countries; it's almost a capital one this. Some day, I suppose, we shall reach the top height of civilization, and put poor men to death; a painless death—say, by electricity; at present we are allowed to go about—in search of work. I am an architect, painter, horse-breaker, cattle-runner, sailor, and one or two other things, so that there isn't much danger of my starving."

"And you do not live here?" asked Mr. Harling, after a pause, during which he had seemed to be digesting Gerald's curt information.

"No!" said Gerald. "I live nowhere, as the phrase goes."

"You may have friends here?" asked the old man, with an uneasy kind of carelessness.

"No," said Gerald.

Miss Grace opened her eyes again.

"You forget that *we* are sitting here," she said in a very low voice.

"Thank you!" said Gerald.

"And where were you employed last, Mr. Wayre?" asked Mr. Harling.

Gerald winced, but answered after a moment: "At a place in Downshire; I was altering an old mansion. But the work was interrupted. Since then I have been doing a little amateur forestry, but I met with an accident—a tree fell a little too previously, and I broke my leg."

Miss Grace uttered a faint cry of sympathy, and leaned forward.

"I am all right now," said Gerald, quickly, to reassure her. "A broken leg sounds worse than it is, and doesn't count, if it is well set. I'm none the worse for it."

"It doesn't prevent your swimming, anyway," remarked Mr. Harling.

Gerald laughed.

"To-morrow I am going to resume my tramp."

Miss Grace rose.

"Will you help me upstairs, father?" she said.

"I will say 'good-bye,' Miss Harling," said Gerald. "I shall probably have started before you are awake to-morrow."

She gave him her small, thin hand, and though he did not notice the fact, it fluttered in his strong palm.

When Mr. Harling came down again he lighted his pipe, and smoked in silence for a few minutes, then he said:

"I think you said you were a painter, Mr. Wayre; do you paint portraits?"

"Yes, after a fashion," Gerald replied.

"Will you paint my daughter's?" asked the old gentleman, as if he were asking a favor.

Gerald hesitated. He knew that Mr. Harling was not dying to have Miss Grace's portrait, and that the offer was prompted by paternal gratitude; he hesitated, and was inclined to refuse; then he thought, "What a charming picture Miss Grace would make!" and said: "Certainly; but, pardon me, you have no proof of my capacity."

"I never yet found a brave man a braggart or a fraud," said the old gentleman, laconically. "And I have every confidence in your ability to carry out anything you undertake. We shall stay here for a little time—the place looks pretty, and—and interesting." He stared at the fire as he spoke. "And we are not tied for time. In fact, we are just wandering about as colonials do when they come back to the old country. How soon can you get to work?"

"As soon as I can procure materials," said Gerald. "I will go into Blagford to-morrow and buy them—to-morrow morning."

"Very well, then," said Mr. Harling, "that's settled. As to the price—"

"Oh, you'd better wait till the picture's finished," said Gerald, with his infectious laugh. "And then I hope you won't pay me only what it's worth."

The old gentleman eyed him shrewdly.

"Don't undervalue yourself," he said. "It's a waste of time and labor, seeing that there's plenty of people will do it for you. Good-night!" He shook Gerald's hand heartily, and tramped up the stairs, but half-way up he paused, and looked round.

"I think you said you didn't know this place at all."

"Not at all," assented Gerald.

"Ah, just so. I thought, if you did, you might show us round; it looks interesting."

"How do you know?" Gerald asked, with a laugh, "You haven't seen very much of it."

Mr. Harling laughed in response, and looked rather confused.

"Just so! Just so!" he said, and went on his way.

Before the father and daughter were down the next morning, Gerald started for Blagford. He was fortunate enough to find a man who dealt in artists' materials, and he purchased the necessary tools for the work which had so strangely and romantically fallen into his hands.

When he got back to the Golden Harp, as the inn at Lar-tree was called, he saw Mr. Harling standing outside the door, with his pipe in his mouth, as if awaiting him.

"You don't let the grass grow under your feet, Mr. Wayre," he said, as he eyed the parcel under Gerald's arm.

"Well, you see, a man can't live on grass," said Gerald. "How is Miss Harling this morning? I hope she will be well enough to give me a sitting after lunch; but I must not worry her—"

"Oh, she'll be ready," said Mr. Harling. "She likes the idea." He tried to look as if he had not suggested it. "I have been having a look around while you have been to Blagford."

"I hope you found the place as interesting as you imagined it," said Gerald, arranging his materials in a cozy little sitting-room, which Mr. Harling had engaged, and into which he had led the way.

"Eh? Oh, yes, yes! I've been having a talk with some of the old inhabitants."

"And found the old inhabitants as uncommunicative and stupid as usual, I suppose," said Gerald. "It's extraordinary what a heap of things the old inhabitant can manage to forget."

"Well—yes," assented the old gentleman, thoughtfully. "He doesn't appear to remember anything excepting his attack of measles at the age of seven. All between that and the present time is a blank."

He spoke as if he were disappointed about something.

"Ah, well, time works changes! You'll give us the pleasure of your company at lunch, Mr. Wayre?"

But Gerald declined, explaining that he had got a crust of bread and cheese at Blagford, and that he would prepare his *avas*, so as to be ready when Miss Harling was ready to

After lunch Mr. Harling gave him a call, and he went in. It was evident that the luggage had come from Blagford, for Miss Harling was attired in her own clothes; and very pretty and graceful she looked, Gerald thought. She greeted him with a little blush, and said yes, she was quite ready.

Gerald set up his portable easel in a good light, and placed a chair for her.

"I'm only going to paint the half figure," he said. "So I'll have all the light I can on your face. May I— Thanks!" and he posed her.

The color deepened in her singularly fair face; her eyes were downcast as he turned her this way and that, until he had got the required position.

"I suppose I am to look pleasant? Am I to smile?"

"Look natural," said Gerald. "That will be pleasant enough, Miss Harling."

Mr. Harling chuckled.

"You've learned one half of the portrait-painter's art, anyhow, Mr. Wayre," he said, "the art of flattery."

"No," said Gerald, candidly. "It was only my way of expressing satisfaction with my subject, and my despair of doing it justice."

"You ought to be able to look pleasant after that, Grace," said the old gentleman, much amused.

Gerald began the rough sketch; and Mr. Harling watched with keen interest and a rather surprised approval.

"You can smoke, Mr. Wayre. Eh, Grace?" he said, as he filled his own pipe. "My daughter's used to tobacco."

"Thanks; presently," said Gerald, absorbed in his work. "Please look straight before you, Miss Grace."

Grace had felt her eyes heavy under his abstracted gaze, but she raised them obediently, her color coming and going in exquisite rose tints.

Gerald worked on quickly and firmly. He had a keen eye, and that peculiar audacity which is one of the artist's most valuable possessions, and the face as it grew upon the canvas interested him. Presently he was conscious of a strange feeling. It seemed to him that he had seen the face, or one that bore a resemblance to it, before, and he paused in his work and stared at his sketch.

"Anything wrong?" asked Mr. Harling, who was immensely interested in every stroke.

"No, no!" said Gerald. "Nothing—excepting, of course, that I am more sure every moment that I shall only *petrate a libel* on Miss Harling."

"Hem! doesn't look like it," remarked her father.

"You have been abroad some time?" asked Gerald, thoughtfully. Surely he could not have met the girl and forgotten her!

"All my life," replied the old gentleman. "I went to Australia a boy, and came back a few weeks ago. You look as if you had been abroad a good deal, Mr. Wayre. Is that so?"

"Yes," said Gerald. "I ran away to sea when I was a lad, and have been wandering ever since."

Mr. Harling glanced at him quickly. "Your people are English?" he said.

"I—believe so," said Gerald. "The fact is, I scarcely know. I was brought up by some people who had adopted me. They lived at a place called Worsley, near Southampton—I suppose it was seeing so much of shipping that gave me a taste for the sea. I wasn't very happy, and so I cut and run."

Mr. Harling puffed at his pipe.

"You were an orphan, then?" he said.

Gerald nodded. "Worse, if that is possible, for I never knew my mother and father," he said, very quietly.

"And these people, what did you say their name was?"

Gerald had not mentioned their name, but he gave it, absently.

"Porson," he said.

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Harling. "They weren't good to you?"

"Well, scarcely that. But I felt free to make a bolt of it."

"You must have been glad to see your friends when you came back," remarked Mr. Harling in a casual voice.

"I haven't any," said Gerald. "The Porsons were living, are alive still, and I was glad to see them; but there was no one else. I haven't a relation in the world that I know of. I am afraid you mustn't look quite so grave, Miss Harling."

Grace started, and blushed; then Gerald, afraid that she was getting bored and tired, began telling them some of his adventures, very much as he had told them to Claire. And the girl listened with rapt attention, her face responding, like a musical instrument, to the touch of his mood. At times he made her smile—and the fair face was rendered beautiful by the smile—and now and again he made her shudder; but he *skipped rapidly* over perils and privations, and dwelt on the *pleasant side* of his life's story as much as possible. It is

scarcely necessary to say that he said nothing of Court Regna. That was a sealed page of the book.

Once or twice she was so absorbed and interested that she forgot her duties as a sitter and moved her head round to him, and Gerald had to go to her and put her straight again. He did it in the most mechanical way, and as if he were adjusting a lay-figure; but every time he touched her the color rose to her face and her breath came and went in a fluttering way.

"You've had an eventful career for a young man, Mr. Wayre," said Mr. Harling.

Gerald looked at him with some surprise. He had thought that the old gentleman had scarcely been listening.

"You ought to have made your fortune."

Gerald laughed. "A rolling stone gathers no moss."

"I don't know," said Mr. Harling. "I've been on the roll all my life, but I'm thankful to say that I have gathered a little moss." He spoke quite modestly, and without a trace of bragging. "That's why I have come home," he went on, simply. "We all come home when we've made our pile, don't we?"

Gerald nodded.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said. "I hope to make mine some day," he added, but without much eagerness; for the thought flashed through him that all the money in the world would not bring him the only thing he wanted. Surely it was not because he was poor that Claire had refused him and dismissed him!

"I think you will," said Mr. Harling, quietly. "It's mostly a matter of luck, after all. I grubbed on for years, until I came upon the Butterfly Mine."

Now, most people who have to do with mining have heard of the wonderful Butterfly, and Gerald opened his eyes.

"The Butterfly?" he exclaimed, with much interest. "You were in that?"

"I found it," said Mr. Harling, quietly.

Gerald looked at him and laughed.

"I congratulate you," he said. "There must be millions in it."

"There are," assented the old gentleman, as quietly as before.

Miss Grace fidgeted and moved, so that Gerald had to stop.

"I do hope you are not going to talk money!" she said, almost irritably. "I hate the sound of the word."

"All right, my dear," said her father, with all a father's meekness. "It cropped out in a natural way." He turned

to Gerald. "My daughter has a horror of being thought purse-proud," he explained, apologetically. "You see, we have met some of the specimens of the self-made people, and—well, Grace doesn't like the make, and is afraid that people will think we're stamped with the same mark. So we avoid the subject, Mr. Wayre."

Gerald smiled. "I understand," he said. "And yet it is the one subject most people are really fond of."

"Then we are exceptions, please, Mr. Wayre," said Miss Grace, almost plaintively.

Her father nodded. "You see?" he said.

Gerald nodded in response. "We won't mention it again—until you pay for the portrait." And he laughed. But both father and daughter rose in his estimation. The man who had discovered the wonderful Butterfly must be a millionaire, or very nearly one; and yet, unlike most millionaires, he avoided the topic of money, alluded to his honestly gotten wealth half shamefacedly, and bore no traces of it about him in the shape of fine clothes or jewelry. Both father and daughter were plainly dressed, and were quite free from any hint of ostentation. Gerald's interest in them increased as he pondered over his work.

Presently he noticed that Miss Grace looked tired.

"That will do for to-day, Miss Harling," he said. "I am afraid I have worn you out. Artists have no feelings—where their sitters are concerned."

"I am not tired," she said, with a smile. "I will stay like this as long as you like."

"Which is not one moment longer," he said, firmly, as he laid down his brush. She looked at him gratefully, and Gerald put his things aside and went out.

"That young fellow's a born gentleman, Grace," remarked Mr. Harling, emphatically. She was standing by the window, watching Gerald striding along the road, and she did not turn her head.

"Have you only just discovered that, father?" she said, very quietly.

"A born gentleman," responded the old man, "for all he's poor and struggling."

"Was it because he was poor and struggling that you found it necessary to tell him that we were rich—disgustingly rich?" she said, with dangerous sweetness.

Mr. Harling reddened.

"You're hard upon me, Grace. It slipped out unawares,

and before I knew it. You don't think I was bragging, Grace?"

"No, no!" she said, more gently. "But—I am sorry." And she left the room.

The portrait was resumed the next day, and the next. Every morning she was posed by the window, and Gerald worked at the canvas. Sometimes Mr. Harling was present, but very often he left them alone together—Gerald was a gentleman, and could be trusted—or strolled in and out, taking his pipe from his mouth to offer some criticism or express his approval. For the portrait promised to be a good one, and, in consequence, Gerald was quite absorbed in it—so absorbed that he did not know that his sitter's eyes often dwelt upon him with a dreamy tenderness, to be turned away swiftly when he looked up. And even if he caught her gaze he would not have suspected the truth, that love was growing, springing up like some tropical plant with amazing growth, within her heart; for Gerald was the least vain of men.

How could she help loving him! There was a powerful charm in that frank and genial manner of his, and he was strong and handsome too boot. Day after day she spent hours with him, was brought under the spell of his manly tenderness, the charm of his dark eyes, with the mysterious sadness lurking in them, the music of his voice, which became more musical when he addressed women—gentle or simple. His very unconsciousness of his power over her only helped to increase and intensify it, and so it came to pass that she lived only when he was present, and spent the weary hours of his absence thinking of him.

As the picture grew under his hand, the resemblance to some face he had seen and forgotten became more distinct to him, and one day he said, absently:

"I wonder who it was?"

She was looking at him, and he started as he spoke, and averted her gaze.

"Who what was?" she asked. "Do you talk in your sleep, Mr. Wayre? I don't know whether you know it, but you spoke aloud then."

"Did I?" he said, with a laugh. "I beg your pardon. It is very strange, but you are like some one I have seen, Miss Harling, and I can't think who it was."

"That is strange," she said; "I don't think you can have met any of my relations. They are all in Australia—that is, on my mother's side. My father's are English, but he has not found any yet, though he seems to be always looking for

them. I fancy he has an idea some of them may be in this part of the world, though he does not say anything about it; but I know he has been making inquiries in this neighborhood. Can't you remember who it was?"

Gerald shook his head thoughtfully.

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"A woman, I think."

"Was she pretty?"

"Of course," he said in a matter-of-fact way.

She blushed, and glanced at him.

"Isn't that rather too obvious?" she said.

"I beg your pardon! Oh, I see! Well, Miss Harling, you have a looking-glass in your room, I expect."

The blush deepened, and her eyes were cast down.

"You are not offended, I hope?" he said, apologetically.

"Perhaps as I am an artist I may be allowed to remark that—I am satisfied with my subject. You are not angry?"

"No; I ought to be," she said.

Gerald laughed.

"I don't know. Most women would be pleased, wouldn't they?"

"It depends upon who says it," she said in a low voice.

"Oh, well, I'm privileged," he responded.

She looked at him quickly, and, with a little catch in her voice, said:

"Privileged—you?"

"As an artist," he said, innocently.

She turned her head away, and the color faded from her face.

"I beg your pardon, but you have moved," he said. "One moment—that's not quite as you were. Allow me"—all unconsciously, as if she were the usual lay-figure, he, gently enough, put her in the former position. His hand scarcely touched her, but she fell a-trembling, her lips quivered, and her eyes closed.

He thought she was going to faint, and looked at her, and then round the room, with all a man's alarm and Heaven-for-saken helplessness.

"What a brute I am! You are tired out! I'd forgotten the time you have been sitting here. Don't faint! Yes, I'm a brute!"

"No, no!" she said; and she stretched out her arm as if to stop him from ringing the bell. "I am not faint; only—*ay a little tired*; I don't think I am even that! And—and

please don't call yourself names. I—I—don't like to hear it."

Her blue eyes, still moist, looked up into his with that expression which is the most dangerous a woman can wear—the look of appealing tenderness and veiled admiration. She was very beautiful at that moment—woman is at her best when love is throbbing at her heart and shining through her eyes—but Gerald was untouched. There was no heart in his bosom to be touched—Claire Sartoris had taken it thence months ago.

"That's nonsense!" he said, as a brother might speak to a sister. "You *are* tired, and you sha'n't sit any longer! Why, you are quite pale—"

"I am *not* pale!" she declared. "Please go on!" but her hand still lingered, ah, so lovingly, on his strong arm, and the blue eyes—heavenly blue, with love's own azure—looked up into his.

Gerald thought, "How pretty she is! I shall never do her justice!" and that was all.

"I sha'n't paint you any more to-day," he said.

"You—you are obstinate!" she murmured.

"I'm a perfect mule when I like!" he said. "Come into the open air—it's not so very cold. Here, put this round you." He caught up one of the awful antimacassars, and threw it round her. "I'll get your father to take you for a drive this afternoon. I've kept you indoors all these fine mornings. Yes, I'm a brute, and that just describes me!"

She let him take her out, and she leaned upon his arm. And he was very tender and gentle with her. The woman who reads these lines will understand how that very gentleness and tenderness increased the pain and the wordless longing in Grace's heart—the man reader will not.

In the afternoon they went for a drive, for Gerald had gained a great influence over Mr. Harling, and had only to suggest a thing to insure its accomplishment. They drove through the lovely Irish country, and Gerald, who accompanied them, expatiated upon the beauty of the scenery; but Grace's eyes were more often on his face than on the emerald green meadows and violet hills.

He dined with them that night—as a rule he refused their invitations—and all through the dinner those blue eyes sought his, instantly to be diverted when he looked their way. After dinner she leaned back in an arm-chair and listened, with half-closed eyes, to Gerald's and her father's talk.

Gerald was speaking of some old ruins he had seen in America; and Mr. Harling was much interested.

"I've got some sketches somewhere," said Gerald. "Wait a moment."

He went up to his room, and came down again with some papers, and pulled out the sketch he had alluded to, and the two men talked for a time, then went out to look at the night.

Grace rose, and moved about the room with the restlessness of a girl in her condition—just waiting for the man she loved to come back and bring the light of his presence with him.

Her eyes fell upon the sketches, and she took them up eagerly. They were *his*, had been drawn by his hand, were instinct of him.

She turned them over one by one, admiring, though she was no artist, the bold, strong drawing, the faculty which made them, slight though they were, impressive; then, suddenly, she started, and her fingers closed over one sketch.

It was the picture of a girl on horseback. Only a pencil-drawing, but so life-like, so eloquent, so strongly endowed with reality, that it was almost as if the live girl and the live horse stood before her.

A woman's instinct is a wonderfully mysterious thing. It rarely fails. As she looked at the drawing, Grace's heart seemed to contract under the grip of an icy hand. She scanned the beautiful features, the graceful figure, with an agonized scrutiny.

"Oh, she is beautiful, beautiful!" she moaned, with dry lips. "It is she—she who stands between us!"

The room grew indistinct, and seemed to be whirling round her; she dropped the sketches in a disordered heap, and clutching the table with both hands, sobbed:

"Father! Father!"

But when Mr. Harling came in a few minutes afterward, they found her lying back in the chair as they had left her, and, apparently, asleep.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GERALD gathered up the sketches carelessly, and in doing so let one fall to the ground. It was Claire's portrait. He picked it up, and his face went crimson and then pale, and he stood as if suddenly overwhelmed by some sharply awakened memory. He did not see that Grace was looking at him, her face lined with pain; indeed, he seemed for the moment to have forgotten the presence of the other two.

Recovering his composure, he thrust the sketch in the breast-pocket of his coat, and resumed the conversation; but he talked absently, and soon afterward said good-night. When he got up to his room, he took the sketch from his pocket, and with it came out the papers he had found in the old bureau at Court Regna. He looked at them for a moment or two, but without unfolding them, before he could remember from whence he had got them; then, with an exclamation of annoyance at his carelessness, he folded them up, and put them into an envelope, and directed it to Miss Sartoris, and, that he might not forget them in the morning, he stuck the envelope in the front of the looking-glass. Then he sat down and looked at the portrait.

He certainly had not forgotten Claire during the last week or so, and his love for her had not decreased; but his work at Grace's portrait, the close companionship with the father and daughter, had occupied his mind and prevented him from brooding over his disappointed love, as he had brooded while lying alone, for weary hours after his accident, in the hut. But now the sight of the beautiful face set his heart all tingling again, and woke up anew the lover's longing. He wondered whether she had forgiven him yet for daring to love her, whether she was still at the Court, and whether—hardest and bitterest thought of all!—some one else had won her!

After a time he could not endure to look upon the face—all so perfect to him—and he put it in his pocket with a sigh, and went to bed to dream of her.

When he got up in the morning, the first thing that his eyes fell upon was the envelope containing the papers, and he remembered that he had inclosed them without a word. Surely that was discourteous! He must write, at least a line or two. But that "line or two" seemed very difficult and almost impossible, and he put the envelope in a drawer, resolving to compose the few words after breakfast. It was so difficult to say anything that would not appear as if he wanted to open a correspondence with her.

"Not that I need be afraid," he thought, sadly. "She will, no doubt, tell Mr. Sapley to acknowledge them, just as she told him to send me that confounded check."

The sitting that morning was a failure. Miss Grace seemed to have lost interest in the picture, or to be out of sorts; and Gerald, brooding over Claire, felt as if he could not work. *Grace was very docile and gentle, and sat as he told her, but her face was quite colorless, and there was a dull look of pain and weariness in her eyes which was quite strange to him*

She did not steal covert glances at him this morning, but gazed straight before her like one in a dream, and a sad one; and when he spoke, she did not turn her head with the quick attention and the prompt smile which she had hitherto accorded him, but kept her eyes fixed on the opposite wall.

Her changed manner puzzled and troubled Gerald. He wondered whether he had said or done anything to offend her, and once he stopped in his work and looked at her with fixed attention. As if she felt the intentness of his gaze, she said, without turning her eyes to him:

"Is there anything the matter, Mr. Wayre?"

"I was wondering whether I might venture to ask that question, Miss Grace," he said in his outspoken fashion. "I was just asking myself whether I could have done anything to offend you."

The color rose to her face, but very faintly, and her eyes dropped, as if to hide the tears that had risen to them.

"What a question!" she said, with forced lightness, but with a stifled sigh. "Let me reassure you. You have not. How could you have done anything?"

"I don't know," he said, but hesitatingly, as if he were not quite satisfied. "One never knows—at least, I don't—I'm such a clumsy, outspoken idiot, and always blundering against somebody's feelings, like a bull in a crockery shop."

"You have broken no crockery in my case," she said. "Why—why did you think you had?"

"Well," he said, "your face made me afraid and doubtful."

"My poor face!" she said, with a laugh that rang rather sad and rueful. "It must be difficult to paint fair women; when they lose their color, they lose their all. I know that I am as expressionless as a sheet of note-paper this morning. It is because I feel tired, I suppose. I am sorry that I am not dark, Mr. Wayre." She had pictured the unknown original of the sketch as dark.

Gerald looked at her, all bewildered by the tinge of bitterness in her voice, and slowly began to clean his brushes.

"What are you doing?" she asked, for she had learned to know his movements.

"Putting the things away," he said, quietly.

"Please don't!" she said. "You—you will make me ashamed of myself and unhappy. Please go on! I will try and look brighter."

Seeing that it would distress her if he refused, he took up his brush again.

"Were all your lady-sitters as tiresome and provoking as I am?" she asked, after a pause, and with affected carelessness.

"Most of them more so," he said. "You are a model of patience and amiability. No, it's not empty flattery," he went on, as she smiled. "I have never known any one—so gentle and long-suffering."

"And you have painted a good many?"

"Yes," he said, absently.

"In England?" she asked. The longing to know the name of the girl on horseback possessed her—the longing and the dread.

He looked at her with some surprise.

"No, I have painted no one in England but you, Miss Grace," he said; then he remembered the pencil-sketch of Claire, and his brows drew together; but it was not a painting, and he did not correct himself.

She glanced at him wistfully, and sighed.

"I hope the picture will be a success," she said. "Will you send it to the Academy?"

"No," he replied. "It will certainly not be good enough for that. All I dare hope for is that it may be something like you—it can not be half beautiful enough—but it may give an idea, a suggestion of the original."

His words brought the color to her face, and her eyes lighted for a moment; then the color faded away again; for a woman knows that the man who loves her does not speak of her beauty so calmly.

"That is nonsense!" she said, almost brusquely. "I am not nearly so pretty as that picture—and you know it!"

As she spoke, Mr. Harling entered. He came into the room with a little bustling air, as if he were rather excited about something, and he looked round in an eager, restless kind of way. He had some letters in his hand, and he glanced at them and then at Gerald irresolutely, as if he wanted to say something; but ultimately he put the letters in his pocket, as if he had decided not to speak of the matter on his mind.

"Well, how are you getting on?" he asked.

"Not at all," said Grace, promptly and wearily.

"You don't look up to much this morning, Grace," he said. "A little off color, and—eh, Mr. Wayre?"

"Yes," said Gerald. "Miss Grace is tired, and I am not going to do any more this morning."

"Wants a change, perhaps?" said Mr. Harling. "What do you say to running away for a day or two, Grace?"

had some letters this morning, one of 'em on business in another part of the old country; and I must run over there. I'll take pou with me; the change will do you good. We needn't be away long. You won't mind giving the picture a rest for a day or two, Mr. Wayre?"

"Oh, no," said Gerald at once. "Besides, I needn't be idle. I can paint in the background, and get on generally. I'm going to put a Japanese screen behind the figure—an old-gold and bronze affair; and I can do that without troubling Miss Grace for a day or two."

"That's all right, then," said Mr. Harling. "We'll start to-morrow morning, and get back as soon as we can."

Grace drew a long breath. The thought of leaving Gerald, even for a few days, brought a sharp little pain with it.

"And we'll go for a drive this afternoon, eh?" continued the old gentleman, rubbing his hands, and fidgeting up and down the room. "A drive will do you both good, for *you* look rather down in the mouth this morning, Mr. Wayre."

Gerald flushed.

"Oh, I'm all right," he said, cheerily. "But I should like the drive all the same."

It was a pleasant afternoon—of course, with a shower or two—and Grace seemed to grow more cheerful after the first mile or so. Gerald did his best to entertain her, and she had him entirely to herself, for her father appeared to be in an extremely thoughtful and preoccupied mind, and to be scarcely aware of their presence. Every now and then he would glance at Gerald in a peculiar way, and then whistle softly, after the manner of old men when they have something on their minds and can not speak of it.

In the evening they were sitting round the fire; Grace was leaning back and looking tired and somewhat sad, and the two men were playing draughts, a game of which Mr. Harling was curiously fond. Gerald could beat him easily; but he often spared his opponent, and extended mercy so cleverly that Mr. Harling never detected it, as, chuckling with enjoyment, he scored the game. Now and again Grace would lean forward and watch them, and, of course, she saw Gerald's kind imposition, and she showed him that she did so by a faint smile and shake of her head. Notwithstanding her pallor, *she looked* very beautiful, with a spiritual loveliness which *struck* Gerald more forcibly than it had ever done before. *It was* gentleness itself, and her love for her father displayed *it* in her eyes when they rested on him, and in a hundred

little ways by which every tender-hearted woman can reveal her affection.

Gerald thought what "a nice girl" she was, and what a capital wife she would make, and, involuntarily, he sighed.

If he had never met Claire! But even if he had seen Grace before Claire, how could he, a penniless adventurer, have asked the daughter of a millionaire to be his wife?

Presently she rose to say "good-night," and, in his admiration and liking for her, Gerald, in all innocence, held her hand a little longer than usual.

"You will be glad of your holiday, Miss Grace," he said, smiling at her rather pensively. "And I hope you will come back quite strong and—"

Her hand fluttered in his, and her eyes sunk.

"Thank you," she said, with a slight catch in her breath. "And you, too, will be glad of a holiday?"

"No," he said, curtly. "I shall not. I shall miss you very much, and sha'n't know what to do with myself except by counting the hours until your return."

She looked at him for an instant—a quick, searching gaze—then she sighed, withdrew her hand, and left the room.

Her father looked after her—we all know the look of love and anxiety!

"She is not strong," he said, as if to himself, rather than to Gerald. "Her mother died of consumption, and"—he cleared his throat—"people think money brings happiness." He laughed grimly. "Of all the nonsense that ever passed current for truth, that's the rankest. I'd give every penny I've got, and be content to take up a spade and work in the fields, if I could have my poor girl hale and hearty as one of the farmer's laborer's daughters. Here—speaking of money—confound it!—hadn't I better give you some on account of that portrait? I don't know how you stand, my boy"—he often addressed Gerald in some such affectionate terms as this—"but I know what it is to be short; and you won't take offense, I'm sure."

"Of course I won't," said Gerald, frankly. "Yes, I am short. Give me five pounds, Mr. Harling."

The old gentleman looked dissatisfied.

"Is that enough? I'm not much of an art critic, but I've sense enough to know that that portrait you're painting is worth a great many five-pound notes. Let me make it twenty—fifty."

Gerald laughed.

"We'll compromise, and say ten," he said.

Mr. Harling took one from a thick bundle of notes, and put it in Gerald's hand.

"I wish you'd let me—well, well! I never paid money more willingly," he added; "and—and look here, I'm a man of few words, but what I say I mean. I want you to consider me your banker. I'm serious. Perhaps, some day you'll understand—" He stopped short. "Anyway, I can't forget you saved her life, and I want you to feel that you can draw on me for"—his face grew red, and his eyes almost fierce—"for half a million, if you like!"

Gerald was touched, and, as usual, he covered his emotion with a laugh.

"Thanks!" he said. "But I shouldn't know what to do with half a million if I had it."

"I'm sure I don't!" said Mr. Harling, ruefully. "Sometimes I've thought of buying a big house, and setting up as a country gentleman; but I've got a touch of the Wandering Jew in me, and I know that, as sure as fate, I should want to up sticks and be off just about the time I had thought I'd settled down. And—and there's Grace"—he paused and looked at the fire—"I shouldn't like my girl to be the prey of some fortune-hunter; and I know well enough that if we lived up to our confounded money, they'd flock around. I'd rather see her the wife of an honest carpenter, say, than one of the sort I have in my mind."

"Miss Grace has too much sense to make a wrong choice," said Gerald. "She is worthy of the best man that ever lived!" He spoke warmly, and the old man glanced at him rather wistfully.

"That's so! Of course I agree with you. But you've known her long enough to know what she is—the best and most loving daughter a man ever had."

A meaner man than Gerald might have thought Mr. Harling was flinging his daughter at his head; but Gerald had no such suspicion.

"She has seemed so much better lately," said Mr. Harling, after a pause; "but to-day she has fallen back to what she was before we came here. I noticed the change last night when she said good-night. I know her looks so well, you see."

"Depend upon it, the change will do her good," said Gerald, encouragingly.

"Yes, yes; I hope so!" said the old man. "I'm going on *business*—" He paused a moment. "You don't take much interest in the people about here, do you?"

Gerald shook his head.

"No," he said. "I have scarcely spoken to any of them—excepting the men who come into the inn. Why?"

"Nothing—nothing!" responded Mr. Harling, quickly. "I only asked— Well, it's time to go to bed, I suppose. I'm sorry you won't take the twenty or the fifty, my boy."

But Gerald refused, with a shake of the head.

The Harlings started the next morning. As Gerald put Grace into the carriage, he chose a great, soft fur traveling-wrap from the multitudinous shawls and rugs, and wrapped it round her.

"Stand up, please," he said in his pleasant, masterful way. "The air is rather sharp this morning, and you must not catch cold at starting."

"I sha'n't catch cold," she said; but she stood up all the same, and he wound her up in it "like a mummy," as she declared.

"Good things are rare and precious nowadays, Miss Grace," he said; "and when we find them we take care of them. Now, you are not to get outside of that until you reach the station, and then you are to put it on again."

"Who made you my keeper?" she said, with a smile. Then, as the significance of the question smote her, she crimsoned.

Gerald was all unconscious.

"Never you mind," he said, with affected sternness. "You've got to do as you're told. Good-bye! Come back strong and well; and, for Heaven's sake, don't be longer than you can help!"

He shook the daintily gloved little hand, and the carriage started, with the usual Irish fuss and noise.

Grace sunk back; but Mr. Harling looked after the stalwart figure as long as it was visible.

"Splendid fellow!" he said. "It's like parting with one's own son. You like him, Grace, eh?"

She could not speak as she battled with her tears. He looked at her, and his weather-beaten face grew red and then pale.

"Grace, my dear, my dear!" he murmured, aghast, as the truth flashed upon him.

"Don't—don't speak to me—not yet—for a little while!" she said in a broken whisper.

He leaned forward, his face all lines, and took her hand and pressed it. "I—I didn't know—oh, my dear! But—" with a note of hope and encouragement in the word.

"No, no!" she said, with a little gasp. "He will not! He will not! I know it!"

"But," he stammered, "you—he said himself how—how pretty you are—he knows how good; he—"

"No, no!" she murmured, passionately. "He never will care for me—like me! There—there is some one else!"

The father gasped.

"Yes, there is some one else! Do not speak of it again, father! Never even *look* it! It can never be—what you want! There is some one else he loves with all his heart."

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Never mind. I *know*. But, father," leaning forward, with tearful eagerness, "you won't let it make any difference in your feeling toward him; remember, he saved my life, and at the risk of his own."

The old man sighed.

"Yes," he said, after a pause. "I'm not likely to forget—it. No, it sha'n't make any difference. But—but—I can't give up hoping. No man with a heart in his bosom could help loving you, Grace—if you—loved him, and he knew it."

She shivered, as if with cold. "But he must never know it. Do you hear, father? I should die of shame. Yes, I should *die*! He must never know! And, father, you must still be his friend. He is poor and friendless, and I am sure he has had some trouble. Perhaps it is connected with *her*! If so, father, we must help him. Do you hear—understand? Why do you look so stern? It is not his fault that I—love him. He can not help it. He has never spoken a word that—that—a brother might not say to his sister, a gentleman to his friend. It is not his fault, but mine, all mine! And, father, I want—I want to make him happy. Perhaps it's money, the want of money, that separates them—if so, you must help! Father, I—I owe him so much!"

"Your life—yes!" he said, gloomily.

"No! more than my life. The greatest happiness a woman ever knows."

"Happiness?" he echoed, incredulously.

"Yes! It is happiness to love, dear, even—even if one can not get love in return."

He did not understand, poor old man. How could he? But he kept silence as if he did; which was the best thing he *could* do.

When they had gone, Gerald began at the background of *portrait*. They say that an artist always falls in love with

his subject—more or less—and Gerald regarded the painted face, with its extraordinary fairness and girlish charm, rather sadly. He missed the father and daughter very much. Grace especially. It seemed very dull and dreary all day without the old man's bustling presence and the girl's soft, gentle voice. It seemed to ring in his ears and haunt him. When it grew dusk he went for a walk, and thought of Claire; and when he went to bed he took the envelope from the drawer and tried to compose those few words which were to accompany the papers. But they wouldn't "come," and he tossed the envelope into the drawer again.

That night he dreamed of her. It was a strange dream. He thought he saw her walking through the London streets. It was pelting with rain, and she looked cold and wet and unhappy. He woke in the morning with the dream still haunting him. It was absurd, of course. The idea of Miss Sartoris, of Court Regna, stalking through the wet and muddy streets of London, alone and unhappy! But the impression of the dream clung to him, and, suddenly, there came upon him a great longing to see—if not Claire herself—the place in which she lived. It grew until it became irresistible. He could not paint. He went out—it rained—and tried to walk the feeling off; but it would not be walked off. He could still see her, helpless and alone in the dreariness and ugliness—and, yes, terror—of the London street. He tried smoking the feeling off—it is wonderful how easily chimeras can be laid to rest by the pipe! But in this instance the faithful tobacco failed.

"After all," he muttered to himself, as he undressed, "there's no reason why I should not go to Regna. I want to see what they've done with that wing—I want—I could take the boat to Bristol, and just run over there and back. And I can give her these confounded papers. Why shouldn't I go? She—she can't eat me; she can only kill me with a cold glance from those beautiful eyes of hers!" He groaned. "Ah, well, it just comes to this; I *must* see her once more!"

When he came down the next morning, he was dressed for the journey.

"I am going away for a few days' holiday," he said to the landlady—"only a few days."

CHAPTER XXXII.

WHEN Mordaunt Sapley slunk away from Claire, he went on his way to the Court slowly, with bent head and writhing

lips, the picture of a whipped hound; but as he neared the house he recovered something of his usual presence of mind.

If Claire had really relinquished all claim to Court Regna, and was resolved to "disappear," the course was clear to him. He would have preferred to have won her as well as Regna, but if she were beyond his reach—well, Regna alone would do. At any rate, her absence made things easy for him. But how to account for her flight?—for it would seem nothing less than flight to the servants and the county. Mordaunt's inherited shrewdness came to his aid, and before he had crossed the threshold of the great house which his father coveted, he had concocted an explanation of Claire's sudden departure.

"I have just met Miss Sartoris," he said to the butler. "She has heard bad news. A relative—a near relative—is bad, very ill, indeed, in Italy, and she has gone to nurse her."

"Indeed, sir. Miss Sartoris's maid said that she had gone quite sudden, and seemed upset like."

"Yes," said Mordaunt. "Miss Sartoris is very much attached to—to her relative. I'm afraid Miss Sartoris will not be back for some time—months, perhaps. You will let things go on as usual, please. Miss Sartoris said something about letting the house—furnished—but we shall know later on. Meanwhile, please say nothing about it."

"Certainly not, Mr. Mordaunt," said the butler; and, as Mordaunt knew, immediately retailed the whole conversation in the servants' hall, from whence it spread, with telegraphic dispatch, round the neighborhood.

Mordaunt went home to his father. He found the old man sitting close over the fire, glowering and muttering to himself.

"She has gone, as I expected," said Mordaunt, pulling off his gloves.

The old man turned his head and showed his fangs.

"Gone? D—n her, let her go! It's the best thing she could do, if she wouldn't take you."

"She would never have 'taken me,' as you put it."

"Then let her 'go!' exclaimed old Sapley, with an oath.

"She was only there on sufferance—*my* sufferance! Let her go as she came! It leaves the coast clear. We'll move into the Court at once, eh, Mordy?"

Mordaunt knit his brows. "Not at once," he said. "Notice of foreclosure must be served on her."

"I served it months ago," said the old man, with a chuckle.

"I handed it to her amongst other papers; but I'll bet a hundred pounds she never read it."

"I dare say. But, still, we must not be precipitate. We must not set the whole county against us. If we go there—"

"If!" exclaimed old Sapley, fiercely. "There is no 'if' about it! I say we shall! I've set my heart upon it! Court Regna is mine—yours—ours—and we'll live there!"

"Very well; don't excite yourself," said Mordaunt. "We will go there, but only as tenants, stewards in charge."

The old man growled.

"No; as owners—rightful owners! D—n it, doesn't it belong to me?"

"We will go there presently, at Miss Sartoris's request," said Mordaunt. "Leave it to me. The first thing we have to do is to find her. I am going up to London by the morning train, and I'll track her. It will be well to know where she is."

The old man swore again.

"I don't care where she is!" he said, with a grim chuckle. "We've done with her; Court Regna is mine, Mordy—mine and yours."

Mordaunt took the morning train for London; but though he made diligent inquiries, he failed to trace Claire. Her simple plan of getting out at Clapham Junction—that railway labyrinth—balked him, and though he spent two days in hard searching in the great metropolis, he failed to get any clew.

He came back to find his father triumphant and stiff-necked in his resolve to take possession of the Court, and Mordaunt had to yield against his wiser judgment. He gave out that Claire had decided upon wintering abroad, and that she had desired Mr. Sapley to occupy the house.

The county wondered and marveled. Why should Miss Sartoris so suddenly abandon Court Regna? Why should she so suddenly resign the place in which she had just commenced, so to speak, to reign? Lord Chester drove over and had an interview with Mordaunt—an interview in which Mordaunt scored all along the line.

It was Miss Sartoris's wish that he and his father should occupy the house. What had Lord Chester to say against it? Lord Chester asked Miss Sartoris's address. Mr. Mordaunt, alas! could not furnish it. Any communication Lord Chester might send would be forwarded to Miss Sartoris.

A *nine-days' wonder* is reduced in these electric times to *two or three at the utmost*, and the county soon grew accus-

tomed to Mr. Sapley's occupancy of the Court. And, indeed, Mordaunt played his cards with a skill which few would have deemed him capable of. He subscribed liberally to every charity and social fund in the locality. He threw open the Court grounds—and they were famous for their extent and beauty—to all and every comer, and he made himself popular with the small farmer and landowner all round the countryside.

Lord Wraybrough, amongst others, was puzzled.

"I can't understand it!" he said, for the hundredth time. "The girl has disappeared as if she were spirited away, and those confounded Sapleys reign in her stead! There has never been anything like it in the history of the county. It is inexplicable! And yet, I—I can't say that the change hurts us—excepting in the absence of a charming girl. Mr. Mordaunt Sapley keeps things going. He is liberal to a fault, and—and— But, dash it, if I can understand it!"

Mordaunt *was* liberal to a fault. He understood the power of money, and he lavished it with a free hand. His father often groaned in spirit over the expenditure, but he did not dare to complain. He seemed to have surrendered his old, strong will to his son. At times he looked at Mordaunt thoughtfully, as he had looked at him on the night he, the father, had asserted his power over Court Regna; but Mordaunt always appeared so confident, so self-assured, that the old man had relaxed that peculiar questioning expression. He seemed content to wander about the Court with his head lowered, his arms folded behind him, muttering to himself, and chuckling now and again.

Some of the servants gave notice—they did not care to serve under the Sapleys—but their places were soon filled. The old butler found it hard to have to serve "Old Sapley and his son, Mr. Mordaunt!" as he had served Lord Wharton and Miss Sartoris; but he got used to it in time. The place and the perquisites were worth having.

Gradually, week by week, month by month, the Sapleys slipped into Claire's place. Mordaunt spent money right royally. There was no stint. The county began to recognize them—money will do anything nowadays. It is the one all-powerful factor in society. There was a vacancy on the bench, and Mordaunt—not his father—was offered it. He accepted it with becoming modesty, and became a J. P.

About this time Captain Hawker died. He had been ailing for some months, and his death caused no surprise. There was almost a public funeral, and Mordaunt attended it.

appropriately clad in black and mourning garb. The old captain's death awakened memories of his and Lucy's wrongs, and for some weeks there was a great deal of talk in the Regna Arms; but it was soon forgotten. But Mr. Mordaunt Sapley's kindness in following the old man's corpse to the grave was remembered vividly enough, and counted in his favor.

At this time there was no man in the county more popular than Mordaunt Sapley; and at this time the member for the county shuffled off this mortal coil. Mordaunt was formally asked to stand. He talked the matter over with his father. The old man welcomed the idea eagerly. "Why not, Mordy?" he said, his eyebrows working up and down, his small eyes lighting up. "Yes, stand, my boy, and you'll get in! It will cost money," he groaned, and tried to hide the groan in a cough; "but we can spend it as well as the other side. A member of Parliament isn't as much as he used to be, but he's something. He's looked up to in the county, and there's pickings in London to be got out of it; you'll get a seat on the boards of some of the new companies, and that's worth having. Yes, stand, Mordy!"

Mordaunt told the deputation which waited upon him that he would become their candidate, if they could not get a better man. He spoke modestly, and with a pleasant friendliness, and gave the deputation a capital lunch. In a few days the hoardings in Thraxton and all the available spaces in Regna were blazing with his address, and adjurations of "Vote for Sapley!" And old Sapley walked about the place and stopped and stared at the bills with a senile chuckle of satisfaction and triumph.

Mordaunt addressed a meeting, a crowded meeting, of the electors, and spoke very well; spoke so well that he surprised Lord Chester, who, perforce, took the chair, and delighted the sharp parliamentary agent from London. Only once did Mordaunt falter and lose the thread of his discourse, and that was at the moment when Jenks, the coastguard, pushed his way into the room through the crowd at the door. Not satisfied with finding standing-room, Jenks shouldered and pushed until he got close up to the platform, and, leaning against the wall, he kept his eyes fixed upon Mordaunt with a glassy, expressionless stare, which any young speaker would have found trying.

The man was an eyesore to Mordaunt, and he sometimes felt inclined to use what influence he possessed, and get Jenks moved to another station; but he took no steps to effect his removal. After the meeting, men prominent in the district

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crowded round him with, if not friendly, cordial attentions, and assured him of their support, and Mordaunt drove home with that peculiar hot feeling about the eyes which elation causes.

He found his father sitting over the fire in the library of the Court—it was the smallest of the living-rooms, and the only one in which the old man was at all comfortable—if he could be said to be comfortable in any—and he greeted Mordaunt with an eager exclamation.

"It is all right," said Mordaunt, quickly, but with a tone of satisfaction in his voice and a gleam of triumph in his eyes. "A very good meeting, and a unanimous vote of confidence. Everybody was very friendly; and even Lord Chester said polite things. They seem to think that I shall get in."

The old man nodded and chuckled, and rubbed his hands together, his cavernous eyes gleaming in a more pronounced way than Mordaunt's.

"Right, Mordy, right! Yes, we'll show 'em that we are as good as they are when brains come in! I'm sorry I wasn't there, Mordy. I should have liked to hear you speak."

Mordaunt's ardor cooled down. He had persuaded his father to remain at home.

"It is as well you were not," he said. "There was a great deal of excitement, and you are not strong enough for that kind of thing."

"No, no," said old Sapley, moodily. "I don't know what's come to me lately. I've got nervous, and—and—fearful about things. And I'm here at Court Regna, too! At Court Regna!" He looked round gloatingly, and rubbed his hands. "At the Court, Mordy, me, the agent and steward! Think of it! And my son, Mordaunt, going to be member for the county division. Ah, I ought to be satisfied!" He drew a long breath, and grinned; but even while his mouth was twisted into a smile, his eyes, fixed on Mordaunt, grew anxious and fearful. It was not the first time Mordaunt had seen this peculiar expression in his father's face; indeed, he had become used to it, and ceased to ask what it meant; but it always annoyed him, just as Jenks' stolid stare annoyed him.

After the night of the meeting, Mordaunt's canvass commenced in real earnest, and he was seen in public as often as possible. He did not venture upon a dinner at the Court—the absence of a lady seemed a sufficient excuse—but he asked people to lunch, and the butler was instructed to be libera

with the ale whenever a Regna voter entered the servants' hall. The game had been very much neglected during Lord Wharton's time and Claire's short reign, and Mordaunt, who knew the value of good preserves to a candidate, set to work to improve matters. He got a good keeper, and gave him *carte blanche*, and let it be known that the poaching would have to cease. A few days after the first election meeting his keeper came to him and said that the poaching was very bad, and that one man was continually at it. He had managed to elude capture, and even recognition, up to the present, but the keeper was sure he could catch him if Mr. Mordaunt would give him an extra hand. Mordaunt employed an extra hand, and a few days later the keeper brought the mysterious poacher into the library.

Mordaunt was jotting down the notes of a speech, and looked up impatiently, to see—Jenks, the coastguard!

"What is it? Who is this?" he demanded, almost angrily.

The keeper explained. This was the fellow who had given him so much trouble, and had hitherto managed to escape; but he, the keeper, had contrived a little trap, and the scoundrel had fallen into it, and been caught red-handed. The keeper was grimly triumphant; but, strange to say, the prisoner did not seem much cast down, or, indeed, hardly disconcerted, as he stood with his hands thrust into his pockets—from one of which a snare at that moment projected—and his eyes fixed on the wall just above Mordaunt's head, with a stolid stare.

Mordaunt eyed him angrily.

"What do you mean by poaching on my preserves, Jenks?" he demanded.

The man lowered his eyes and looked Mordaunt squarely in the face, but said nothing.

"He's been at it night after night, sir!" said the keeper. "I found two pheasants lying beside him when I nabbed him."

Jenks said nothing, but his eyes met—with an expressionless stare—Mordaunt's angry gaze, changing slowly to one of ordinary annoyance and vexation.

"Leave him to me for a moment, keeper," he said, much to the worthy man's astonishment.

When the door had closed upon the keeper, Mordaunt addressed Jenks.

"What the devil do you mean by poaching on the preserves, Jenks?" he said, irritably. "You know that—that I am getting up the game, that I have shooting-parties, and

want some birds for my guests—I don't care so much for myself—and—why the devil can't you leave them alone?"

A slow, stolid kind of smile—too stolid and slow to be called triumphant—stole over Jenks' face; but he said nothing.

"You'll get into trouble if you don't take care," resumed Mordaunt. "You can't expect me to let you off again, if you're caught. Keep out of the preserves, my good fellow, or you'll find yourself in jail."

"I ain't afraid, Mr. Mordaunt," said Jenks. "A man must get the price of a pint somehow or other."

Mordaunt shut his teeth sharply. What was there about the man, or his manner, that always reminded him—of—of Lucy and that narrow slip of sand below the west cliff?

"Confound you!" he said, passionately. "You talk like an idiot! I believe you *are* a little mad. Here, take that, and leave my game alone for the future." And he actually flung the man a sovereign. "Here, go out this way"—he opened the casement window—"and keep out of the keeper's way for the future, or—" He paused, for Jenks turned and looked at him waitingly; then, as Mordaunt did not finish the sentence, he went out. Mordaunt sunk into his chair and looked before him vacantly for a moment; then he called the keeper in.

"The man is an old coastguardsman, and begged hard to be let off, and I have let him go on the understanding that he keeps away from the preserves," he said. "If he breaks his word, we will prosecute."

The keeper stared in amazement. "I thought you wanted the game kept up, sir," he said, as he departed, disgusted and disappointed.

Mordaunt sat looking before him for some minutes after the keeper had left the room.

Why had he not prosecuted Jenks? Why had he given him money instead of sending him to jail?

As he asked himself the question, with a fierce kind of impatience, Lucy's face rose before him, and he heard her voice praying for mercy and pity, and his own face went white.

"Curse the fellow!" he muttered. "The sight of him always—always makes a fool of me. And yet there's no reason—"

He took up his pen again, but he could not go on with his *notes*—his ideas were all scattered—and he flung the pen into *the stand* and went out into the hall and took his hat from the *stand*.

He had got almost as far as the door, when the bell rang. The porter opened the door, and some one said:

"Is Miss Sartoris at home?"

Mordaunt's heart seemed to stop short at the sound of the voice, the question itself. For the voice was Gerald Wayre's!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"Is Miss Sartoris at home?"

The simple, commonplace question sent the blood rushing back to Mordaunt Sapley's heart like a cold flood. He stood staring stupidly at the door like a man paralyzed.

"Miss Sartoris is not here, sir," said the servant, one of the new ones who did not know Gerald, "but Mr. Sapley—" and he looked toward Mordaunt and made way for Gerald to enter.

Gerald crossed the threshold and saw Mordaunt, and the two men stood and looked at each other for a moment. Mordaunt was pale, but he forced a smile, a sickly smile.

"Mr. Wayre!" he said.

"Good-morning," said Gerald, too moved at finding himself once more inside the Court to notice Mordaunt's agitation; "I wish to see Miss Sartoris—" he began; then something in Mordaunt's manner struck him. "You are surprised to see me, Mr. Sapley?"

"Ye-s," said Mordaunt, fighting hard for calmness, and trying to hit upon his course of action. What should he do? He had known that the man might turn up some time or other, but he had hoped against hope. Chance had hitherto favored him so completely. Gerald might have died!

"Yes, I must confess that I am. I thought that you had left this part of the country for good, Mr. Wayre."

"So I had," said Gerald, "but I have suddenly discovered that I had something belonging to Miss Sartoris, and I thought"—he hesitated—"that I would bring it to her."

Mordaunt shifted, so that the light was off his face, and on Gerald's. He saw that Gerald looked well—grave, but well—and as handsome as ever. The time that had elapsed since their last meeting, the time and all that it had contained, had caused lines in Mordaunt's face, and hardened it, but Gerald seemed unchanged, but for the air of gravity.

"Miss Sartoris is not here," said Mordaunt, regaining his composure. "She is not in England."

"*Not in England?*" repeated Gerald, his face flushing and then growing pale. He knew at that moment how ardently

he had looked forward to seeing her, just seeing her and hearing her voice.

"No," said Mordaunt, looking down at the tessellated floor, as if he saw its pattern for the first time. "She went abroad to join a relative who was ill; and to nurse her, as well."

Gerald was silent a moment, then he said: "Can you give me her address?"

"I can not," said Mordaunt, with the promptness of perfect truth. "She is traveling about in the south of Europe, I believe."

Gerald looked round.

"She will return soon, perhaps?" he said, interrogatively. "I see the Court is not closed."

"No," said Mordaunt; he paused a moment. "My father and I are living here." If he did not tell Gerald he would learn it from some one else.

Gerald looked surprised.

"You are living here?" he said; then he added, quickly: "I beg your pardon! It is no business of mine. Then Miss Sartoris's return is uncertain?"

"Quite," said Mordaunt. "When did you come back, Mr. Wayne?"

"Just now; only an hour ago," said Gerald.

"Do you intend to stay long?" Mordaunt could not refrain from asking.

Gerald shook his head.

"No—I don't know," he said, hesitatingly. "No." He looked round the hall. Not a thing was altered; it seemed as if he had not been absent for longer than a few days—hours!

Mordaunt's heart began to beat more freely. Perhaps the fellow would go away again—go before he learned that he was suspected to having taken Lucy Hawker away!

"If you will leave me your address, I will send you notice of Miss Sartoris's return," he said. "But won't you come in, and—and have some refreshment?"

Gerald shook his head.

"No, thanks," he said, still abstractedly. "I am staying at—" he paused. "But it is no use my giving you my present address; I may be leaving there shortly—any time."

"If you would like to leave anything in my charge for Miss Sartoris, I will see that she has it," exclaimed Mordaunt.

Gerald took the envelope from his pocket. "There are some papers I found in the old bureau, in the west wing—I don't know whether you remember it? I put them in my

pocket, and—of course—they have remained there until I came upon them by chance the other day.”

“I remember the bureau,” said Mordaunt. “I don’t suppose they are of any consequence. What are they?”

“I don’t know,” said Gerald. “I have not unfolded them.” He held out the envelope, and Mordaunt stretched out his hand for it. Even as his fingers touched it, Gerald drew it back.

“After all,” he said, with a smile, “I think I will give it to Miss Sartoris myself. I wish to speak to her, and—and it will serve as an excuse,” he laughed apologetically.

Mordaunt nodded.

“As you please,” he said. “Are you—are you going to the village, to stay?” he said.

Gerald nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “I should like to see the old place again. Though it seems that it, or, rather, the people, have forgotten me already,” and he laughed rather grimly.

Mordaunt’s heart began to sink again. “How do you mean?” he asked, with simulated carelessness.

“Oh, only that one or two persons—one of the fishermen and an old woman and a girl—passed me and stared without speaking, as if I were my own or somebody else’s ghost.”

The color ebbed in Mordaunt’s cheek. “I don’t understand,” he said, steadily. “Oh, I dare say they weren’t sure of you. It is some time since you were here—”

“A few months,” put in Gerald.

“Is it not longer?” said Mordaunt, with genuine surprise. It seemed years, awful years, to him.

“No,” said Gerald; “and country folk, at any rate, should have longer memories.”

“I have no doubt they were surprised to see you under the circumstances,” said Mordaunt.

Gerald was inclined to ask, “Under what circumstances?” but he did not. “I will go down and look at the village,” he said, moving toward the door, “and I will send you my address, Mr. Sapley.” At the door he paused. “Nothing more has been done to the west wing, I suppose?” he asked.

“Nothing,” replied Mordaunt.

“I should like to see it, if I may?”

“Certainly,” rejoined Mordaunt. Gerald wished him “good-morning,” and went out, and Mordaunt turned back to the library, and sinking into a chair, stared before him, breathing hard like a man who has been running at the top

of his speed. With Gerald's return, the past—the murder of Lucy, the strip of sand in which she lay buried, his frenzied walk into Thraxton—came rushing back upon him. What should he do? Here he was in Court Regna—as good as owner—a candidate for the county seat, a rising man, already respected and looked up to; the man who intended to be the first man in the county; and this terrible, squalid, miserable danger menacing him!

Gerald walked along the terrace. As he passed the windows of one of the smaller rooms he saw old Sapley crouching over the fire. The sight of the bent, plebeian figure sent a kind of shock through Gerald. Old Sapley and his son Mordaunt here at the Court; and Claire, the mistress, no one knew where! What did it, what could it mean? The place looked threatening, ominous, as if some tragedy had taken place within its walls; a sense—too vague to be a suspicion—of something wrong, something evil, smote him. He reached the end of the terrace and looked at the half-demolished wing. It had been “cleared up,” and made as tidy as possible, but its unfinished, neglected appearance increased the impression the presence of the Sapleys had created. As he stood looking at the spot from which he had dragged Claire out of reach of the falling wall—and recalling her face, her voice, her sudden agitation and meekness under his stern reproof of her recklessness, a young girl came up to him.

He remembered her in a moment; it was the little maid who waited upon Mrs. Burdon. He raised his hat and smiled at her rather sadly. “How do you do?” He had forgotten her name, if he had ever heard it. “And how is Mrs. Burdon?”

The girl dropped a courtesy, and looked up at him shyly, and with a smile.

“She’s very weak and ailing, if you please, sir,” she said.

“I am sorry to hear that,” said Gerald.

“She’s—she’s often asked after you, sir,” said the girl, after a moment’s hesitation.

“For me?”

“Yes, if you please, sir; she has wanted to see you many a time; wanted to bad.”

“To see me? Well!” said Gerald. “I’ll come and see her, if you think she is well enough.”

“Oh, yes, sir!” said the girl, with evident satisfaction.

“She mayn’t know you—that is, she may take you for—”

Gerald smiled. “I remember,” he said. “Does she still mistake me for a lord?”

The girl did not reply, but looked down and smiled shyly as he walked beside her. Nurse Burdon lay in her neat little bedroom behind the sitting-room, and the maid led Gerald in. At first he thought she was asleep, and he looked down with a strong man's pity and reverence at the face which was like a mask, a white mask of wrinkles, some thick, some thin as cobwebs; but slowly she opened her eyes, and after looking at him a full minute, said, with singular distinctness, though in a voice as low as a sigh:

"You have come, my lord!"

"Yes, I have come to see you," said Gerald. "I hope you are—going on all right?"

"Yes, I'm going on—fast, now, my lord," she said, with a smile of contentment. "I sha'n't be very long. How is her ladyship? You haven't brought her?"

"I haven't brought her," assented Gerald.

"Ah, it's a rough passage in winter!" she said. "Though she was a fairly good sailor, bless her heart. How sweet she looked that day! She was a beautiful bride, my lord."

Gerald listened intently, and even eagerly. He knew, now that he had heard the captain of the "Susan's" story, whither her mind was wandering. There had been a marriage, then!

"You were at the wedding, of course, nurse?" he said.

She smiled up at him.

"Have you forgotten that I was, my lord?" she said.

"Ah, my memory's good, for all my years and my failing health; and I can see her now, and you, too! God bless her!" Then, suddenly, as the girl moved, she beckoned Gerald and looked round cautiously. "I've said nothing—nothing all these years, my lord! Your lordship could trust me—me, Nurse Burdon! I can hold my tongue, as you told me, until you bring her home. But you did"—she looked troubled and perplexed—"you *did* bring her home, didn't you, my lord? I saw her at the Court; I saw her with you outside the garden there. Surely I didn't dream it!"

Gerald hadn't the heart to undeceive her; and he took her hand and pressed it. She tried to return the pressure.

"Ah, my lord, she's a loving wife, if ever there was one, and you are a happy man—a happy man!"

Her eyes closed, and her wasted hand slipped from his. Gerald thought she had fallen asleep, but suddenly she opened her eyes again and looked at him, and, to his surprise, without any sign of recognition.

"Who is this?" she asked, turning her head to the maid.

"It's the gentleman—Mr. Wayre, nurse."

The sharp look came into the mask.

"Wayre! Wayre!" she repeated. "What do you know—how dare you mention that name? I don't know this gentleman! I—" Her voice faltered into silence, and her eyes closed again.

Gerald stroked her hand, but she appeared unconscious of his touch, and he left her.

"Take care of her," he said to the maid. "But it isn't necessary to ask you to do that, I know," he added, quickly. He was about to give her some money, but it seemed an insult to the child's devotion, and he let the coin slip into his pocket again, and went on his way.

As he passed through the gate and was striding along the road, a man came round the corner, stopped dead short at sight of Gerald, and uttered an exclamation. It was Lee.

"Halloo, Lee!" said Gerald, holding out his hand. "I'm glad I've met you so soon! How are you?"

Lee took his hand without hesitation, but looked confused and embarrassed; but only for a moment.

"When did you come back, sir?" he asked.

"An hour or two ago. I've been to look at the wing. It wasn't my fault—at least, I suppose it *was*!" he added, rapidly, under his breath. "I'm sorry, for your sake, Lee. You would have made a good job of it, I know. But perhaps Miss Sartoris may finish it some day. I'm going down to Regna."

Lee stared at him, seemed about to speak, then said:

"I'll go with you, sir."

"Do!" said Gerald, heartily. He had always liked the man, and was glad to see him, though his presence awakened cruel memories of the happy times gone by. "How are all our friends, the Hawkers? I suppose they can give me my old room if I stay a night or two?"

Lee glanced at him.

"Captain Hawker is dead!" he said, quietly.

"Dead!" Gerald stopped short. "Dead, did you say? Oh, poor old fellow! And how is Miss Lucy?"

Lee stared at him, and then straight before him, and muttered:

"I knew it! I knew it!"

"What do you say?" asked Gerald.

"Nothing, nothing, sir," said Lee.

They walked on, Gerald inquiring for some of the other

folks, and Lee answering almost in monosyllables. Gerald thought him very taciturn.

Now and again they passed some persons on the road, and Gerald nodded and smiled, but, though some nodded, they all stared.

"Singular folk!" he said. "I suppose they are surprised to see me, as Mr. Mordaunt said."

"Yes, they are surprised," said Lee, grimly.

They went down the narrow street of steps and turned on to the little terrace in front of the Hawkers'. It was closed.

Gerald stared at it.

"Why—it's shut up!" he said. "Poor old Hawker! And Lucy's gone, I suppose? I am sorry, sorry!"

Lee looked hard at the house without speaking, Gerald absently tried the handle of the door. It was unlocked, and opened to him, and he went in. Lee followed him, and they looked round.

"Well, this is the saddest thing!" said Gerald. "Tell me all about it, Lee. What did he die of? He seemed so hale and hearty—too fat, perhaps, poor fellow! but a long way out of Death's reach."

"He died of a broken heart, sir," said Lee.

Gerald turned quickly.

"A broken heart?" he repeated, shocked and amazed.

"What about? Was it money?"

"No, sir," said Lee. "It was—Lucy."

"Lucy!" exclaimed Gerald. "Why, what—what happened to her?"

As he spoke, a peculiar murmur came through the half-open door—a murmur made by several voices speaking at once, and with suppressed excitement. Both men turned, and Gerald walked to the door. As he did so, a cry, a low, threatening cry, arose from a small group collected outside.

"There he is! Yes, it's him! He's come back!"

Then, before Gerald could speak, a young fisherman thrust himself forward, and with glowering eyes, exclaimed, fiercely:

"Where is she? Where is Lucy?"

"Where is—Lucy?" echoed Gerald in stony astonishment.

"Where is—" He turned to Lee. "What does he—what do they—mean?"

"None o' that!" exclaimed the young fellow—he had been one of *Lucy's* lovers—"you know what we mean well enough! *Where is she? You've come back, but we want her, or we want to know what's become of her!*"

"*Ay, that's it!*" cried the others in a threatening chorus

Gerald stepped outside. He was still too amazed to be angry.

"One of you—not all together, please, tell me what you mean," he said, quietly.

"You know what we mean, d—n you for a cowardly hypocrite!" snarled the young man. "You took her away; 'ticed her away, and broke her father's heart, and now you pretend— Oh, let me get at him! He's played her false, or he wouldn't stand there lying about it! Let me get at him, I tell ye!"

They held him back, but Gerald had not flinched.

"You are speaking of Lucy—Captain Hawker's daughter?" he said. "And you accuse me of—what is it?—taking her away? Be quiet, please," for the murmur of indignation had risen again. "Hear me out. You accuse me of this—this dastardly act? Well, you are wrong! I am innocent!"

A snarl of incredulity arose.

"I repeat, I am innocent! Lee," he turned to Lee, who had drawn close to his elbow, "what does this mean? For God's sake, explain!"

"It means that we know your wickedness!" shouted a woman. "You come here like a snake in the grass, with your fine gentleman ways, and ruin a poor girl that never did you any harm; ay, and killed her father! You're a murderer as well as an entrapper o' innocent girls, that's what you be!"

"Yes, and by Heaven! I'll punish you!" cried the fisherman; and he broke loose and sprung upon Gerald.

Gerald set his feet firmly, and caught the blow upon his left guard, then he seized the young fellow, and, with a dexterous movement, swung him round and pinned him against the wall.

"Now, stop there!" he said, sternly. "You talk of punishing me; well, you should do it—all of you, if you liked—if I were guilty of this thing. But I am not! I am innocent. Stand quietly! I don't want to strike you, God knows; and I will not do it, if—if I can keep my blood down! I want to know the truth, the whole of this thing you lay at my door. Speak, some one!" He looked round. Dark and threatening looks faced him at all points—at all, excepting that at which stood Jenks, who leaned against one of the bulkheads on the terrace, smoking, as usual. "Lee, *you* tell me, and—and be quick!"

Lee laid his hand on the pinioned man.

"Let him go, sir. William, you stay quiet till—till I've—ken!" The young fellow shook himself free, and stood *wering* and breathing hard.

"Yes, sir; Miss Lucy was taken away; she ran away from home, and—and nothing more's been heard of her. It's true what they say; it broke her father's heart."

Gerald looked round.

"This"—he could not go on for a moment, and the spectators viewed his hesitation with increased suspicion, or, rather, conviction—"this is terrible! Poor Lucy! Poor girl! But," his eyes flashing, "why do you dare accuse me of being her betrayer? Great Heaven! I would rather have died than injured her as you think! Why have you fixed upon me?"

His gaze—it was blazing with indignation—flashed round the group. They were staggered for a moment by the vehemence of his denial, but only for a moment.

"We all know!" said a woman. "You were seen with her times out o' number!"

"Seen with her—talking—walking with her? Yes! Why not?" exclaimed Gerald.

"And alone!" persisted the voice.

"Alone? Yes, scores of times, for all I remember!" said Gerald, with fiery scorn. "And do you think that because I stopped to speak to the poor girl—the daughter of the house in which I lived—that I was planning her ruin? Shame! Yes, shame! Black must be the heart that can think such evil!"

"She fled the night you left—left without a word, stole away like a thief—a thief, as you are, curse you!" broke in William. "The same night! You went together; you stole her from us—yes, from us all! If she didn't go with you, *who* did she go with?"

Gerald stood at bay, his face white with his emotion.

"The same night?" he repeated, dully.

"Yes!" repeated the woman. "You were seen walking with her the night before—right away up at the Court, planning it all, I'll be bound!—and the next night you both go. William's right! If she didn't go with you, *who* did she go with?"

§ Gerald swept his hand, with fierce impatience, across his forehead.

"Give me time."

"To hatch more lies, d—n you!" snarled William.

"The same night!" said Gerald, almost to himself, as if he were trying to recall it. He began to see what good cause for *their suspicions* these poor people had. "Let me think *Yes! I see! I left without a word—there was no one about*

"I—" He turned to Lee. "Lee, they were right to suspect me. It all looks black, black as hell, against me! Wait! I've admitted that; but I tell you again that I am innocent!"

The crowd, thicker now, growled ominously.

"Come away—inside the house, sir!" said Lee in a low voice. He knew how reckless, how fierce these simple, quiet fisher folk could be when they were roused. There is Spanish blood in the veins of the Regna people, and it shows itself now and again. "Come inside, sir."

"No!" said Gerald, aloud. "I am not afraid! I say I am innocent! Until this moment I did not know that Lucy had gone, that her father was dead. Do you believe me?"

They looked at him and each other.

"I have been out of England—in Ireland—have seen no paper, heard no news."

"Tell us why you went so sudden?"

The question came from the quick brain of the woman.

The crimson rose for an instant to Gerald's face, then faded, and left it white again.

"I can not."

"Ah!" came like a deep breath from the accusers.

"It is no business of yours—no, I will not say that. It is private to me; it concerns me alone."

"And Lucy?" said the woman.

"No, that I will swear!" said Gerald, with quiet intensity. "It has nothing to do with her! I saw her for the last time on the preceding night, and not since. I left the place because—Lee knows. Speak, Lee! I sailed in the 'Susan,' that lay at the quay."

A derisive laugh interrupted him.

"He makes believe he's a sailor now!" said William. "He knows the 'Susan' went on a long voyage. You liar!" He took a step nearer, the crowd closed round; two of the men began handling knives with which they had been cleaning fish. Lee stripped off his coat like lightning, and stood in a line with Gerald.

"Stand back!" he said, firmly. "He speaks the truth; I know it!"

"He lies!" roared the crowd, now hot with the lust for vengeance. "Where's the girl? He's deserted her, killed her, most like!"

They closed in, and one man struck Gerald; Gerald guarded *be* blow, but only partially, and it knocked him against the *r* jamb. He raised his fist to strike back—he was not good *asking* blows, even under such strenuous circumstances as

these—when a horseman rode straight into the group and scattered it.

It was Mordaunt Sapley. He was white to the lips—and must have been half mad with apprehension and excitement to ride down the steep street—and could scarcely speak for a moment.

“Stand back!” he said, hoarsely. “What does this mean? Stand back; give way! I’m a magistrate, and I’ll— Stand back!”

The crowd fell back, but grudgingly, and with low growling, like that of a wild beast balked of its prey.

“He’s come back without her!” said the woman. “He won’t own to it; he’s left her—to starve, likely enough. Ride on, Mr. Mordaunt, and leave ’un to we! We’re, some of us, Lucy’s kinsfolk, and we have a right to punish ’un!”

“No, no!” said Mordaunt, his shifty eye glancing from one to the other. Suddenly they fell upon Jenks, who had now seated himself on the bulkhead, and was still smoking, as if he had no part nor lot in the business on hand. At sight of him Mordaunt felt a peculiar shiver run through him.

“Mr. Wayre,” he said, with an attempt at pomposity, “what have you to say?”

Gerald broke in sternly, fiercely—the blow had roused his blood. “That I am innocent! I know nothing of the girl’s fate, nothing, nothing! I can prove that I left the place alone— But no matter, for the present, about my innocence. I am accused of a dastardly crime, such as only a coward, a beast unworthy the name of man, could perpetrate. Let that pass!” His eyes flashed. “I care nothing for what they think, but I *do* care for the girl, and *I will find the man who wronged her!*”

There was something in his voice and manner that almost awed the crowd. It was as if Justice, personified in this strong man, with the white, working face, had descended from the heavens to promise them vengeance.

“You say you saw me walking and talking with her. Yes; I liked, I respected Lucy Hawker! I pitied her, also; for—now I remember—she was in trouble that night I last saw her. I advised her to confide in her father. That’s all the clew I have; but, because I lived under the same roof, because she was a helpless, cruelly wronged woman, I will not rest until I have found her! Why—why have not some of you, who *stand here so ready with your hands—and knives—not done as much?*”

They looked at one another and then back at him.

"We did," said one. "Leastways, Mr. Mordaunt did. He tracked 'ee—Lucy and 'ee—to the junction—"

Gerald turned swiftly on Mordaunt, who winced and shrunk, then put a bold face on it.

"I—I tried—they said that some one—a gentleman—was seen—Lucy—a bundle—" he said, disjointedly.

Gerald looked at him fiercely and keenly.

"And you at once concluded that I was the villain! Thank you, Mr. Sapley! And yet I *have* something to thank you for, for you can give me a clew. Now"—he turned to the crowd—"I remain with you—here—on this spot, in this house! Do you think I could do that if I were guilty of her father's death? Here I stay! And who shall say me nay?"

"Well, if he isn't innocent, he—he's a masterpiece!" swore one of the older men.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE crowd drew away after a time, and left Gerald and Mordaunt standing alone.

"I presume I have your permission to remain, Mr. Sapley?" said Gerald. He was still white, and his nostrils were quivering, but Mordaunt was whiter still, and seemed unable to lift his eyes from the ground. He stood flicking his legs with his riding-whip.

"Certainly!" he replied. "Of course. Though I must say that I think your offer rather—quixotic; and I don't see what good you can effect by remaining here and playing the amateur detective."

"Do you still suspect me, Mr. Sapley?" asked Gerald, his eyes fixed searchingly on Mordaunt's face.

"Of course not," said Mordaunt. "I am bound to accept the word of a gentleman; but you must admit that the case looks very clear against you."

"I admit it," said Gerald, shortly. "It is because the evidence is so strong against me that I claim the right to prove my innocence by discovering the guilty man."

"I fear you will never succeed," said Mordaunt, with a shrug of the shoulders. "It is so long ago, and the girl left no clew behind her."

"You forget the man who was seen with her at the station, and the bundle," said Gerald.

Mordaunt's eyelids twitched. "I should advise you not to *attach too much importance to that*," he said. "There may *have been half a dozen* such couples at the station that night."

"Then I'll find every one of the half dozen," said Gerald. "The man who lured her away must have been here before, must have been seen with her."

Mordaunt shrugged his shoulders again. "Some commercial traveler, or captain of a vessel," he said, "who has disappeared as mysteriously as he came. And, perhaps, after all, Mr. Wayre, we may be doing him an injustice; he may have married the girl."

"If he has not," said Gerald, "I'll make him—if she is still alive."

Mordaunt with difficulty repressed a start of fear. "Alive?" he echoed, with a short laugh. "Why should she not be? Don't make the tragedy blacker than it is!"

"It is black enough for me already," said Gerald. "But I am thinking more of Lucy than myself—of the poor girl and her broken-hearted father."

"Well, I wish you every success," said Mordaunt. "I need scarcely say that I have done all I could to trace her. Is there anything I can do for you to make you comfortable here?"

"Nothing, thanks," said Gerald. "I shall be glad if you will send Miss Sartoris's address, when you know it," he added, as Mordaunt turned away. And Mordaunt looked over his shoulder, and replied:

"Certainly; immediately I learn it."

Gerald went into the house, and after a moment or two Lee followed him, and, without a word, commenced lighting the fire.

"You don't think me guilty, Lee?" said Gerald, as he opened the window.

"No, sir," said Lee. "Not from the first."

"Who did it?" asked Gerald.

Lee shook his head, and stolidly piled on the coal, and then, while Gerald paced up and down, Lee tidied the room, and made it somewhat comfortable.

"You're a true friend, Lee," said Gerald, holding out his hand. "I shall never forget the way you've stood by me."

Lee colored with pleasure. "A chap wouldn't be worth much, sir, if he wouldn't stand by a man when he saw him wronged."

"Come upstairs with me," said Gerald. "I want to see if I can find any clew."

They went upstairs and found things in strange order, just as they had been left after Captain Hawker's death. Gerald

went into Lucy's room, and looked round, with sad reverence; a grim foreboding smote him at sight of the narrow bed.

"The whole place has been searched for some clew, sir," said Lee, "and nothing was found."

They went into Gerald's old room, and the sight of the things lying about, of the drawings and plans, awakened the keen memory of the few happy days—all too happy—he had spent at Court Regna.

"I shall sleep here," he said; "I feel as if the truth would reveal itself, if ever it does, in this house."

They went down-stairs again and discussed the problem, and Gerald explained his long absence.

"If you had only sent me your address, sir," said Lee, regretfully.

Gerald winced and colored. "After I had received notice of the discontinuance of the work, my connection with Court Regna had ceased, Lee," he said, "and I wished to forget it."

Lee wanted to stay and cook for him, and share in his quest; but Gerald would not permit him, and after a time, Lee left him alone. Gerald lighted a pipe, and sat down beside the fire to think. He had undertaken to find Lucy's betrayer. How was he to begin? His mind traveled back to every occasion on which he had seen her, and, during the course of this retrospect, he remembered the evening he had been sitting on the quay, and seen her go round the rock with a young fellow whom he had failed to recognize. He remembered that he had thought the man bore some resemblance to Mordaunt Sapley. But this vague resemblance did not help Gerald much. Even if it had led him to suspect Mordaunt, the suspicion would not have remained in his mind; for Mordaunt had evidently not left the place, was here still. Besides, Mordaunt Sapley was too ambitious a man to imperil the prospects of his career by an intrigue with a girl so much below his own station. The man must either have been a stranger, or one of the young men in the place.

He went down to the quay and made inquiries as to who had left Regna at the time of Lucy's disappearance. He found a group collected there, talking eagerly and excitedly; and at first they received him with coldness and covert suspicion, but his utter fearlessness and his evident sincerity soon told upon them, and they answered his questions eagerly. No one whom they could possibly suspect—save himself—had left Regna at the time. Everybody had been on the alert; it could have been impossible for one of the young men to have appeared without being suspected.

Gerald—he did not declare his innocence again—left them, and returned to the cottage. As he entered, a thought struck him, and made him stop short, as if he had been shot. If all Regna had thought him guilty, so also must Claire have done! The thought sent the blood surging through his heart. Here, then, was the explanation of her refusal, of her coldness, of his dismissal! He was so overwhelmed by the reflection, by the feverish desire to find her that very instant and declare his innocence that he did not remember for a minute or two that her refusal of him had been given hours before Lucy's disappearance.

The remembrance brought him relief, but still left the mystery of her coldness as complete as that of Lucy's fate. It was only natural that his thoughts should flow toward Claire; he had almost forgotten her in the excitement of the last few hours; but now, *her* disappearance began to loom upon him almost as heavily as that of Lucy. Where had she gone? Why had she left no address? And why were the Sapleys installed at Court Regna?

He spent a greater part of the night futilely asking these and similar questions—he might as well have asked them of the Sphinx.

Early the next morning he went down to the station and commenced his inquiries. He was met by a kind of civil impatience. No one knew anything. He went on to the junction, and interviewed every official; but he could get no information, and he could not discover the man who had told Mordaunt of the young man and woman with the bundle. Everybody declared that he had not seen such a couple, or that if he had he had forgotten them.

This struck Gerald as strange.

He returned to Thraxton. As he was walking from the station he met Lord Chester. His lordship was riding along slowly, with his head bent and an abstracted look on his face. Gerald thought that he had aged very much. He and Lord Chester had exchanged a few words in the old days, and some impulse prompted Gerald to stop and raise his hat. Lord Chester regarded him absently for a moment as he returned the salute, then said:

"Mr. Wayre, I believe? Good-morning, Mr. Wayre; I have not seen you for some time."

"No, my lord," said Gerald; "I have been away. During my absence sad changes have taken place in Regna."

Lord Chester colored slightly.

"You allude to Miss Sartoris's absence, Mr. Wayre?"

"That was not in my thought for the moment, my lord," said Gerald. "I was referring to the disappearance of Captain Hawker's daughter."

Lord Chester looked at him steadfastly, and with a certain coldness, which brought the color to Gerald's face.

"I should like to say, my lord," he said, "that I am innocent of any wrong that may have been done. I can scarcely ask you to believe this, but I am waiting for the return of the vessel in which I left Regna on the day of the girl's flight, to make my innocence clear. Until then I must be content to remain under the shadow of suspicion."

Lord Chester looked steadily at him, then held out his hand.

"Mr. Wayre, I can not but believe you," he said.

Gerald swallowed a lump in his throat as he took the white hand.

"I ventured to stop you, my lord, to ask you a question," he said. "Can you tell me Miss Sartoris's address?"

The color rose to Lord Chester's face again.

"I regret that I can not," he said. "I have tried to discover it. Miss Sartoris left the Court quite suddenly, without bidding farewell to any of her friends. She has not written to any of us. I can claim no right to her confidence, beyond that which belongs to"—he hesitated a moment, then, still meeting Gerald's grave regard, said, with quiet dignity—"a most sincere and abiding affection."

Gerald inclined his head before this frank admission, and the evident signs of the speaker's grief and anxiety.

"She has gone to the south of Europe, in company with a relative," said Lord Chester.

"Who told you this?" asked Gerald in his curt way.

"The Sapleys," replied Lord Chester. "It is generally known."

"And the Sapleys are ruling at the Court!" said Gerald.

"Can you explain that, Lord Chester?"

Lord Chester's brows drew together. "I can not!" he said. "It is a mystery to me. It troubles me. Why do you ask me these questions, Mr. Wayre?" he added.

Gerald felt a strange impulse to tell him the truth. "Because I love Miss Sartoris, Lord Chester," he said.

The blood flew to Lord Chester's face, and his hands gripped the reins tightly.

"You?" he said in a low voice.

"Yes, I!" said Gerald. "Do not misunderstand me, my lord. My love is quite hopeless; but it is my excuse for asking

you for tidings of her, for being dissatisfied with the explanation given by the Sapleys."

Lord Chester regarded him in silence for a moment, then he said: "I, too, am dissatisfied. But what can I do; what can you do? We have no right to spy upon Miss Sartoris's movements. She is her own mistress, and we have no authority to question her actions. We can only wait until we hear from her, or she returns. God grant that may be soon!"

"Amen!" said Gerald, almost fiercely. "There has been foul play in one direction, and all my mind is blackened with suspicion."

"What do you suspect?" asked Lord Chester.

"I do not know," responded Gerald, curtly. "My lord, you will keep my secret?"

Lord Chester inclined his head, as if it were not necessary for him to give the assurance in words.

"Come to me, Mr. Wayre, if you wish to confer with me or need assistance of any kind. Miss Sartoris's well-being is more to me than life itself." He touched his hat and rode on.

Gerald strode along, deeply moved, for in telling his secret he had learned Lord Chester's. As he neared the Court lands he heard the sound of firing, and presently saw a shooting-party in the preserves. They were laughing and talking, and in their midst was Mordaunt Sapley. He had all the air of a host entertaining his guests, and it was evident that he was playing the part as if it were a familiar one. The sight filled Gerald with amazement and bitterness; it seemed an incredible one.

Why, only a few months ago he had flogged Mordaunt Sapley, not far from this very spot, for ill-treating a dog; only a few months ago he, Gerald, had walked beside Claire along that path, and Mordaunt Sapley, if they had met him, would have saluted them almost like a servant. Had all the world at Court Regna turned topsy-turvy? As he stood looking at them, Mordaunt came his way and saw him. He started slightly and frowned, but recovered himself instantly and nodded pleasantly at Gerald. Gerald could scarcely bring himself to return his salutation, and walked away. Before he had gone many yards, Mr. Mordaunt Sapley's election address stared him in the face. Gerald stopped and read it, and laughed bitterly.

Yes, certainly, things had come to a pretty pass at Court Regna! As he reached the cottage, still fuming inwardly, he saw Jenks, the coastguard, sitting on a bulkhead. He touched his hat, and looked at his pipe and then at Gerald.

"Could you give me a pipe of—"

Gerald cut him short by chucking him the tobacco-pouch. Jenks filled his pipe leisurely, glancing at Gerald sideways as he did it.

"Been makin' inquiries, sir?" he asked.

Gerald nodded absently as he gazed out to sea.

"And ain't found anything, sir, judging by yer looks?" said Jenks. "You couldn't hear o' that gent?"

Gerald did not see any reason for concealing his failure.

"No," he said.

"Ah!" said Jenks, lighting his pipe, "if you trace that there bundle as Mr. Mordaunt heard of—the bundle she took with her—you'd find out the truth soon enough, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," assented Gerald, moodily.

"That there bundle's worth something," remarked Jenks, musingly. "I should say it was worth a power of money."

The man's words struck Gerald as strange, and he looked at him for the first time with some attention.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Of course it would be a very strong clew. If we could trace that, we should trace poor Lucy."

"Ah, poor girl!" said Jenks. "I wonder somebody ain't offered a reward," he added, reflectingly. "It 'pears to me that's the best way of findin' things."

"Reward!" said Gerald. "I would give—" He stopped and sighed. "I'm sorry to say I'm a poor man, Jenks; but if I were rich I'd give a thousand pounds for anything that would help me to find Lucy Hawker."

Jenks puffed at his pipe thoughtfully. "Yes, it's worth that," he said in a casual way. "Well, sir, I wish you luck in your search; not as I think you'll have any," he added to himself, as Gerald went into the cottage.

Jenks sat smoking his pipe on the bulkhead for half an hour or so, then he got up and walked off toward the cliff. When he had reached the point which overlooked the slip of sand beneath which Lucy lay sleeping, he stopped, and, looking down, scratched his head thoughtfully. "I reckon it's about time," he said to himself. "He's a clever 'un, is this Mr. Wayre; cleverer than the other devil. If I wait much longer I shall come in a day after the fair."

He went on his beat, but, when the dusk had fallen, he turned from the cliffs and went up the Court road. He walked quite openly until he was quite close to the house, then

he hesitated, scratched his head, and turning away from the entrance, went along the terrace. Lights had been lighted in some of the rooms, and a lamp was burning in the library. Jenks looked in at the window, and saw Mordaunt seated at the table. He was in evening dress, and a diamond shirt stud flashed into Jenks' eyes. Mr. Mordaunt was neither reading nor writing, but was sitting with his head resting on his hands, as if he were very tired or lost in thought.

Jenks tapped at the window.

Mordaunt started, sat erect, and stared at the darkness outside. Jenks tapped again, and Mordaunt drew aside the partially closed curtains and opened the window. As he saw Jenks, his face went white, and he drew back half a step; then, with an affectation of anger, he demanded: "What the devil are you doing here?"

Jenks took off his hat and stepped into the room.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, with the impassive stolidity which had always infuriated Mordaunt. "I have stepped up for a little advice."

Mordaunt bit his lips as he closed the window and turned to confront the man.

"Why didn't you come by the front way?" he asked.

"Beg pardon, sir," said Jenks, with a kind of wooden respect. "Thought this 'ud be more convenient."

"Well, what is your business?" asked Mordaunt, with all the hauteur he could command.

"It's about this Lucy Hawker affair, sir," said Jenks.

Mordaunt started, and, to hide the start, sunk into his chair. "Well?" he said, harshly.

"It's just this way, sir," said Jenks; "I've heerd as there's going to be a reward offered for information; some says as it'll be as much as a thousand pounds—at any rate, it's worth that."

"Who is offering a reward?" asked Mordaunt.

"Well, I reckon it'll be Mr. Wayre. Oh, yes, he's a poor man," he went on, slowly, as if in answer to Mordaunt's sneer. "But he can get money from them as 'ud like to know the truth—Miss Sartoris or Lord Chester!"

"Well, supposing this," broke in Mordaunt, "what have you to do with the business? What is it to you?"

"Only this," said Jenks, with the same cast-iron stolidity, "seein' that I was on the cliff, and saw you chuck her over, and afterward watch you from behind the rocks, while you buried her—and very neat you did it too, sir—yer see, I'm in

a fair way of getting that thousand pounds, ain't I, Mr. Mordaunt?"

Mordaunt rose to his feet, livid with amazement and terror.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MORDAUNT fell to trembling like a leaf. A feeling of nausea, of actual physical sickness, came over him, and he stared at Jenks with distended eyes, as if he did not see him; indeed, he saw nothing but the dead body lying on the sand. Then the paroxysm of terror gave place to a frenzy of rage, of impotent rage; that he should be in the power of this clod, this lump of common clay; he, Mordaunt Sapley, whose cleverness and astuteness were becoming a by-word in the neighborhood!

He leaned back and wiped the cold sweat from his livid face. He did not attempt to deny, to bluster; he knew it would be of no use. The man had seen him—could hang him. He had to accept the fact and make the best of it.

Jenks watched him with the same stolid regard. There was something terrible in the cool, matter-of-fact way in which the man played his part; he might have been selling a basket of herrings or an old boat, so utterly impassive and almost uninterested were his manner and expression; and he waited for Mordaunt to speak, with the most perfect patience and certainty of the result.

Mordaunt spoke at last. The words seemed to leave his lips with difficulty, and his voice sounded hollow and weak.

"What is it you want?" he asked, going direct to the point.

"Well, I was thinking a thousand pounds wouldn't be too much, Mr. Mordaunt," said Jenks.

"That is—ridiculous!" said Mordaunt, thickly. "Fifty or a hundred—"

Jenks shook his head. "'Tain't near enough, Mr. Mordaunt!" he said. "The other party 'ud give me a thousand. I'd better wait and see, or go to them; it don't make no odds to me whether I gets it from them or you. I've only got to take them the bundle and show 'em that neat little grave—"

"The bundle?" said Mordaunt.

Jenks nodded. "Yes, I've got that. I picked it up where *she* dropped it; funny, your forgetting that bundle, Mr. Mordaunt, wasn't it?"

"And if I give you this thousand pounds," said Mordaunt, "what will you do?"

"I should buy a little farm," said Jenks, "somewhere in this neighborhood."

"And lose the money and come down upon me for more!" said Mordaunt, with something like a snarl. "I think not! Listen to me, Jenks! You think yourself very clever; you think that you have got me in your power, and that you can bleed me to the last penny. Don't be too sure. You are an ignorant man, Jenks, and know nothing of the law; you imagine that no harm can come to you over this affair; you fancy that you have only to carry your story to the police, take your reward—your blood-money—and go in peace. You are mistaken. If any trouble comes to me, you will share it!"

"Me, sir?" said Jenks, with an incredulous smile. "How can that be? I didn't have no hand in it!"

"Ah," said Mordaunt, "that's where you are so ignorant, my good Jenks! Did you never hear of an accessory after the fact? I imagine not. And yet that is what you are. The man who conceals his knowledge of a crime, and so assists the criminal, is, in the eyes of the law, only less guilty than he. You say that you saw me—that you saw certain things on a certain night, months ago; you have concealed the knowledge, have suppressed the evidence; you would be tried as an accessory after the fact with the actual criminal, and, if he were hung, you would be sentenced to penal servitude."

Jenks looked quite unmoved, but he scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Lor' bless me! Is that so, Mr. Mordaunt?" he said. "No wonder common sort of folk like me get into trouble. How can they be expected to know the law? Penal servitude and all, for not splitting on you right away at first! Seems kind o' hard on you, Mr. Mordaunt, don't it?"

"Hard or not," said Mordaunt, "it is the law. I can show it you plainly written in one of these books."

"Don't you trouble, Mr. Mordaunt," said Jenks. "You're a lawyer, and ought to know; and I'll take your word for it; and, that being so, the best thing I can do is to make myself scarce."

Mordaunt drew a long breath. A gleam of light streaked the awful gloom of the prospect.

"You're a sensible man, Jenks, I see," he said. "If I give you this thousand pounds you will have to leave England at once. You can do better with your money abroad than you can here; and I'm not afraid that you will come back. *Shall I tell you why?*"

"Just speak what's on yer mind, Mr. Mordaunt," said Jenks, cheerfully.

"Because the moment I know of your return, I should denounce you." He leaned forward, his small eyes, very like his father's at this moment, fixed with malignant hate upon Jenks' face. "I should denounce you as the murderer!"

"Me?" exclaimed Jenks, astonished for the first time.

"Yes, you!" said Mordaunt, deliberately. "You have had this bundle in your possession all these months, you know where—the body lies; that looks suspicious! Why should you not have committed the murder?"

Jenks laughed. "That sounds very clever, Mr. Mordaunt," he said. "But, come to that, why *should* I?"

An idea struck Mordaunt, an idea which sent the blood to his white face.

"Wait a moment, Jenks," he said, quivering with excitement. "How do you know that it was me you saw on the cliff? Think! Think again! *Wasn't it Mr. Wayre?*"

Jenks' stolid face displayed something like admiration. "That sounds better, Mr. Mordaunt," he said. "But Mr. Wayre says he went aboard the 'Susan' long before you had chucked her over the cliff."

Mordaunt shuddered at the man's callous way of referring to the awful deed.

"It is only a question of an hour or two," he said. "Put the time back. At any rate, you see, Jenks, that I am not so completely under your thumb as you imagined."

"Oh, you're clever enough, Mr. Mordaunt!" said Jenks. "And I'm only an iggerant kind of man. Seems to me, you'd better give me the money and let me sheer off. I sha'n't come back, trust me. A man don't go bathing where he knows sharks are swimming. I ain't no match for you, Mr. Mordaunt, and I'll clear out of your way as soon as possible—to-morrow, if you like."

Mordaunt got up and paced the room. His knees trembled; he felt hot one moment, cold the next, and the brain upon which he was relying burned like a coal.

"No, that would be too sudden," he said. "It would attract notice and arouse suspicion. You might go in two or three days." He knit his brows with a painful effort of *thought*. "You could say that a relative had died out in *Australia*, and that you were going out to look after some *money* he had left you. You could say you were coming *back*. I can help you to obtain leave of absence. Tell th

story of the uncle in Australia at the inn to-morrow. Bring me the bundle to-morrow night."

Jenks shook his head placidly. "Not me, Mr. Mordaunt," he said. "I ain't going to walk about with that bundle, if I know it; there's too many eyes about. If you want it, you must come and fetch it, that's flat! I've got it hid away snug and comfortable in my hut; you bring me the thousand pounds and you shall have it, and I'll clear off."

There was silence for a moment or two, then Mordaunt raised his head, but looked above Jenks as he said: "Very well. I will think the matter over and let you know. You shall have the money on the conditions I have named. You can go now!"

"Good-night, Mr. Mordaunt," said Jenks; and, as habit is strong as death, he added, in the sweet, old way: "Have you such a thing as a pipe o' tobacco about you, Mr. Mordaunt?"

Mordaunt stifled a curse, and taking some cigars from a box, threw them on the table. Jenks picked them up carefully, one by one, and as carefully, one by one, stowed them away; then, with the same wooden and utterly stolid countenance, nodded and went out by the window, as he had come. He lighted a cigar before he reached the lodge, and as he smoked, he stared at the ground thoughtfully.

"He's most *too* clever, he is," he said. "He's like a conger eel; you don't know whether you've got him, or you ain't; slippery's what I should call you, Mr. Mordaunt. I'm ac—ac—ess'ry after the fack, am I? Well, I'm blowed!"

After he had gone, Mordaunt drew the curtain, and, sinking into the chair, hid his face in his hands. At such moments as these, the criminal suffers more agony than that which is contained in the brief minutes when the rope is actually round his neck; and, indeed, Mordaunt could almost fancy that he felt the hangman's hand upon him. His nerves were strained to their utmost tension, and when the door suddenly opened he sprang up with a sharp cry, clutching the arms of the chair. It was old Sapley who had entered, and he stood regarding Mordaunt's livid, terror-stricken face with consternation and alarm.

"Mordy! Mordy!" he gasped. "What is it? Are you ill, Mordy?"

"No, no!" said Mordaunt, quickly. "Yes, yes! I am not well—a little faint. Get me—get me some brandy!"

The old man hurried from the room and came back with a glass of brandy shaking in his hand. Mordaunt seized it and

drank it off. His father watched him with anxious eyes and quivering lips.

"What is it, Mordy; what is it?" he asked. What's happened? Something's gone wrong, I know! You frighten me, Mordy. And it isn't the first time. You look like you did the night you came home late from Thraxton. What is it, Mordy? You're not hiding anything from me, are you? Don't do it; don't do it, for God's sake! If you're in trouble, I can help you! I'm not in my dotage yet. Best confide in me, Mordy! I'm the best friend you've got. It's my brains as has built it all up. If you've done anything rash—men will, when they're driven hard and think they're going to be thwarted—confide in me."

"Confide!" A wild laugh burst from his tightly strained lips, an hysterical laugh, which increased the old man's terror. "What do you think I've done? Robbed a church, or—or what? You talk nonsense! I'm ill, I tell you! I shall be better directly. For Heaven's sake, go, and leave me alone!"

The father had grown so accustomed to obedience that he left the room, looking back over his shoulder with an agony of apprehension in his sunken eyes.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SISTER AGNES had awakened the desire to live in Claire's heart, and her recovery was rapid enough to please even the doctor and the sister herself. As she regained her strength, she was eager to get back to her work at the school; and one day, when the sun was shining with the warmth which called up memories of the departed summer, she coaxed a reluctant permission from the doctor, and went into the school.

Her appearance was greeted with that murmur which takes the place of a cheer with girls; and Miss Gover was so delighted at seeing her that she was tempted—only tempted—to give the girls a half-holiday; but no one was more moved than little Tiny, who, disregarding all discipline, ran into Claire's arms, and hugged her with childish cries of love and joy. For quite half an hour the school was disorganized, but presently Miss Gover's sharp tap with the ruler was heard above the babel of voices, and the Goddess of Work resumed her normal sway.

Claire felt rather tired the first day, but before the week *had passed* she had regained her old strength, and entered into *her daily labor* with a zest which delighted Miss Gover, and *brought its own reward* to Claire. She and Sister Agnes now

shared the same sitting-room, and, when possible, took their meals together.

The sister never alluded to the story of her life nor to Claire's troubles, but in a thousand little ways she showed her love for the solitary girl whom Providence had placed under her care; and Claire returned that love with interest.

At the end of the street in which the school stood was a house much larger than those in the street; but like many of the others, it was let in apartments. One day when Claire was returning to the school, after dinner, she saw a fly standing at the door of Arundel House. An extremely fair and pretty girl, wrapped in furs, was lying back in the carriage.

She looked very delicate and very listless, and the old gentleman who was with her regarded her, as he helped her to alight, with that anxious and watchful expression which a father wears when he is tending his sick child. As Claire passed, her eyes and the girl's met for a moment, and, so to speak, lingered with a mutual admiration. The father and daughter stood aside to let Claire pass, and she went on her way. Several times during afternoon school she thought of the pretty girl, and it was only natural that, as she went by the house on her way home, she should look up at the windows.

The girl was standing there, and evidently saw and remembered Claire, for she turned and said something quickly to some one in the room, and the old gentleman appeared at the window. The next morning, returning to dinner, Claire saw the girl going out; they looked at each other again, this time more attentively, and Claire fancied that there was a wistful expression in the blue eyes. Either at the window or in the street she saw her every day; and at last she asked Mrs. Holland who they were. The landlady, of course, knew something about them. There is a kind of freemasonry amongst landladies which induces an exchange of information about their respective lodgers.

"Their name is Harling," said Mrs. Holland. "Father and daughter, miss. She do seem very delicate, don't she? Sweetly pretty, too. Her father seems very fond of her, and Mrs. Simpkins, their landlady, says as she thinks that they're very well off."

That afternoon Claire missed her pocket-handkerchief. As she was passing Arundel House some one tapped at the window, and, looking up, she saw Miss Harling holding up a *handkerchief*. She disappeared from the window, and Claire waited. A moment or two afterward the door opened, and

Miss Harling appeared. She was a little flushed, as if with excitement, as she said, with wistful eagerness:

"This is your handkerchief. I saw you drop it."

"Oh, thank you," said Claire, smiling; and she held out her hand, but Grace whipped the handkerchief behind her back.

"Do you want it very much?" she asked.

Claire stared at her, then laughed softly.

"Because if you do, perhaps you won't mind coming upstairs for it," said Grace. "Do you mind?"

"I shall be very pleased," said Claire; and she followed the singular girl up to the drawing-room floor.

"Won't you sit down?" said Grace. "You ought to give me in charge, for I as good as stole this handkerchief; I saw you drop it, and I didn't call after you, and father says that is as bad as stealing, Miss Sartoria."

"I don't think I will give you in charge," said Claire. "You know my name?"

Grace nodded, and leaned forward in her chair, with a faint smile, and the same eager, wistful air.

"Oh, yes; I know all about you." Claire started slightly. "You lodge at Mrs. Holland's, up the street, and you teach at the school. I have seen you go by every day, and I—I have often wanted to speak to you. Do you think that rude and forward of me? I'm afraid it's what you call 'bad form' in England."

"On the contrary, I think it was very kind of you," said Claire. "If it was wrong, I must plead guilty to the same feeling, Miss Harling."

"You know *my* name?" said Grace, archly.

Claire colored and laughed.

"Curiosity is the failing of our sex," she said.

"No, it's one of our virtues," said Grace in her shrewd little way. "I'm glad we know each other's names, because it does away with the necessity of an introduction. I'll tell you all the rest about myself, if you like. I'm staying here with my father; he has a great deal of business to do with lawyers in London, and I can't live in London, because of the fogs, so we've taken rooms here."

"And do you like it?" asked Claire. "Streatham, I mean?"

"Oh, yes," said Grace, listlessly. "It's a pretty little place enough; the shops are rather nice. Oh, yes, I like it!" she sighed, and leaned back. "And now won't you tell me *something* about yourself?"

Claire winced for a second, then she said, quietly:

"There is very little I can tell you. You know where I live; I teach at the school—and that is all."

"Forgive me!" said Grace. "I *am* rude and inquisitive. But I didn't ask from idle curiosity, but by way of saying that I wanted to know you. I have seen you so often as you passed by, that I have felt as if we were old friends. And, it is very strange, the first time I ever saw you I thought I must have met you before; there is something in your face that awakened some recollections; but, of course, I know that I've not met you—I mean, to speak to—until now."

At this moment Mr. Harling entered the room, and looked from one girl to the other with natural surprise. Grace rose and took his arm coaxingly.

"Father, this is Miss Sartoris. I have netted her at last; it was with a handkerchief. I played a mean trick upon her; but I think she will forgive me, for I've been telling her how much I wanted to know her. Speak up for me, father, and tell her that I am a very lonely, solitary girl, a stranger in the land, and that I am just dying for one girl friend."

Mr. Harling patted her hand and looked at Claire pleadingly. "I'm afraid this is all very irregular, Miss Sartoris," he said, "and that you will think us very peculiar folks; but my girl here is—is not overstrong, and she's been spoiled."

"Thank you, father," said Grace. "I couldn't have done it better myself. After that, I am sure you can't refuse to stay to tea," she added to Claire.

Claire was sorry to refuse, but she was obliged to do so.

"I can not stay this afternoon," she said, "because my friend, the lady with whom I live, would be anxious about me. I always reach home at a certain time, and she would not know what had become of me."

"You mean the Sister of Mercy?" said Grace.

"Yes, Sister Agnes."

"What a pretty name!" said Grace. "We have often seen her, and wondered what she was like, for her face is always hidden by her veil; but she looks as nice and sweet as her name."

"Yes," said Claire, simply, but with deep significance. "She is everything that is good and gentle. But for her—I should not be alive now to sing her praises."

"Father, couldn't you go round presently to Sister Agnes, and explain that we have kept Miss Sartoris prisoner?" said Grace.

But Claire, knowing how carefully Sister Agnes avoided

meeting strangers of her own class, rose and said that she would run home and come back presently. She found the sister awaiting her.

"I am glad you have found new friends, dear," she said. "Go by all means." She seemed a little agitated as she asked: "What did you say the name was?"

"Harling," replied Claire. "They are very nice people, and the girl seems overflowing with kindness. I am afraid she is very delicate. It is touching to see the affection between her and her father; his anxiety is so obvious. I won't stay long, sister."

"Stay as long as you like, dear," said Sister Agnes, very quietly.

Claire was just a wee bit excited by the novelty of the circumstances, and did not notice the peculiar constraint of Sister Agnes's manner. She went back to Arundel House, and had tea with the father and daughter. Grace treated her almost like an old friend, and Mr. Harling was extremely kind; but he was very thoughtful, and once or twice Claire found him looking at her with a singular intentness.

He asked her one or two questions, as to how long she'd been living in London, and so on, and presently left the girls alone.

"Now we will have a nice chat!" said Grace, and she proceeded to give Claire a sketch of her life; but she did not tell her that her father was a principal shareholder in the Butterfly mine.

As she listened to Grace, Claire felt half ashamed of her own reticence. She could tell her nothing of herself in return.

"I hope we shall be great friends," said Grace. "I'm inclined to think there is a special providence about our meeting, and I'm also inclined to believe that friendships, as well as marriages, are made in heaven. You'll come for a drive with me sometimes, won't you? I can't walk very far; I've often watched you admiringly as you came down the street; you look so strong, and you walk so gracefully."

Claire laughed.

"Don't be offended," said Grace. "I couldn't help telling you how much I admired you, if I tried. I'd often heard of the beauty of the English girls, but I've never seen one half so pretty as you; but pretty isn't the word. Now, I suppose I am what people would call pretty, in the sixpenny doll style, but you are—oh, I can't find the exact word."

"Don't try," said Claire, laughing, but blushing a little.

"I've got it! Distinguished! That's the word. You wear things like the great ladies one sees driving in the park. Now, that dress fills me with admiration and despair. I've never succeeded in getting one to look anything like it. Where did you have it made? Anywhere about here?"

"It is one of Redfern's," said Claire, making the admission absently.

Grace stared and laughed. "You extravagant girl!" she said. "Fancy wearing a Redfern to teach in a school! I'm afraid it's thrown away upon the girls; or, perhaps, you use it as an object lesson—a lesson on Form?"

Claire colored slightly. "I have had it a long while," she said. "It is one of my old dresses."

Grace looked at her shrewdly. "You were not always a school-mistress in Streatham?" she said.

Claire looked at the fire. How could she venture to tell this warm-hearted girl?

"Not always," she said.

"I knew it!" broke in Grace. "The first time I saw you I said to father, 'That girl is a lady'—I mean, what the English people call a lady, meaning a 'swell.' It's a horrid word, dear, but it's the only one that expresses the meaning. You carried your head and walked like the pictures of the marchionesses and countesses one sees in the illustrated papers. And so you were rich once, and didn't always teach in a school? Did you lose your money? You don't mind my asking you?"

"Yes, I lost my money," said Claire, "or, rather, it never was mine. I can't tell you the whole story; and, indeed, it does not matter. I am quite happy"—she checked a sigh even as she spoke—"and I do not think that money matters very much. I don't want you to think that I am posing as a high-minded kind of person; what I mean is, that one can be, if not very happy, at least content, teaching in a school in Streatham."

Grace looked at her admiringly, and touched her hand with girlish sympathy.

"I should like father to hear you say that!" she said. "It is just what he admires. All the world has gone mad about money lately, and I am delighted to find some one who thinks lightly of it, and who cares as little for the loss of it as you do."

"I lost something else besides money," said Claire, with an impulse that was new to her. "But I'm getting over it. One has an idea that all the misery in the world has fallen to one's

lot; but I have learned otherwise. Sister Agnes has taught me that, however much one has suffered, there are others who have suffered more deeply." Her face seemed transfigured as she spoke, and Grace looked at her with a kind of awe.

"Now you look noble!" she said, under her breath.

"Please don't stick me on an imaginary pedestal!" said Claire, with a laugh. "You would find that I should tumble off so very, very quickly."

"Too late!" said Grace. "I have stuck you up there already, and I know you'll never come down."

So they sat over the fire and talked until the striking of ten by the clock on the mantel-piece startled Claire to her feet; and this was the strange beginning of an acquaintance which ripened with an extraordinary rapidity into a warm friendship. Grace seemed to have given her heart wholly and unreservedly to Claire, and confided to her everything—except her knowledge of a gentleman named Gerald Wayre. She coaxed Claire into taking a drive with her nearly every day, and the drive did them both good, and brought back the glow of health to Claire's face. Grace even paid a visit to the school, but, as she put it, was very quickly "chucked;" for her appearance created too much excitement in that region of decorum and strict discipline.

Claire, of course, talked a great deal about her friends to Sister Agnes; but, though she was glad that Claire had made the acquaintance of the Harlings, the sister could not be persuaded to meet them.

"They lie outside my world, dear," she said. "I dread strange faces, excepting those of the poor and wretched. There is no room in my heart for any one but them and you—and my dead child."

One day Mr. Harling came into the room where the two girls were sitting talking over a new dress for Grace, and announced that he would be obliged to take a journey into the country. Grace looked aghast.

"I couldn't possibly go further," she said, with an air of mock sternness. "For one thing, I've got to see about this dress; and for another, I couldn't possibly leave Claire. Now, if Claire would come with us—"

Claire laughingly shook her head.

"Very well," said Mr. Harling. "I will leave you behind to the care of the landlady, and, if I may venture to say so, to Miss Sartoris."

Grace put on the airs of a little child. "Do! I'll promise to be good, and do everything she tells me. Oh, Claire,

couldn't you come here and live altogether while father is away? Now, that's a splendid idea; in fact, I won't consent to his leaving me unless you promise to come. Indeed, it wouldn't be safe. I'm not to be trusted; I should get a latch-key and go to one of your music-halls every night, and behave generally like one of the new women."

Claire said she would come if Sister Agnes approved.

"You treat her as if she were your mother," said Grace, with a little pout.

"She has been more than a mother to me," said Claire.

Sister Agnes gave her permission, and Mr. Harling started on his journey.

"I will wire my address," were almost his last words.

* * * * *

The following day Gerald was walking into Thraxton to see the inspector of police there, for he had at last decided to place Luey's case in the hands of a good detective; for he himself had failed to find the slightest clew, although he had made inquiries in every direction, and had devoted all his time and energy to the search. As he strode along, in deep thought, he saw a fly approaching, and glanced at it absently; then he started and stopped dead short, for the occupant was no other than Mr. Harling.

Gerald shouted and stopped the carriage, and Mr. Harling and he stared at each other in mutual astonishment.

"Why, lad!" said Mr. Harling, with a certain warmth of affection in his tone more marked even than of old. "You here?"

"Yes," said Gerald. "Haven't you had my letter? I wrote to Lartree."

"I've not been back there," said Mr. Harling. "I've been traveling about—on business. You here, of all places in the world!" he added in a lower tone.

"How strange that you should come to this place!" said Gerald, on his side.

"Oh, I told you I was a kind of Wandering Jew," said Mr. Harling in rather a confused manner. "And this is one of your show places, isn't it?"

Gerald nodded. "How is Miss Grace?" he asked. "You haven't brought her with you; I hope she is not unwell?" There was a friendly anxiety in his tone, but nothing warmer.

"Grace is all right," said Mr. Harling. "I left her in London."

"And so you've come to see Court Regna?" said Gerald. Mr. Harling started and looked at him curiously.

"That's the great show place," explained Gerald.

"Oh, ah—yes, I've come to see Court Regna," said Mr. Harling. "Jump in, my boy."

Gerald hesitated a moment, then, reflecting that he could go back to Thraxton with the fly, got in.

"It's very extraordinary, you're being here," said Mr. Harling.

"Well, it isn't really," said Gerald. "I was employed some months ago to renew a wing at the Court."

Mr. Harling stared at him.

"I'm afraid you will think I've been very close and—secretive, Mr. Harling," said Gerald, his tanned face flushing.

"But I had reasons for not mentioning the matter. It is a sore subject with me." Mr. Harling watched him closely.

"The work was suddenly discontinued, and I left the place under a cloud—yes, under a cloud in many senses of the word, for I was suspected of having enticed one of the village girls to accompany me. I hope I need not say that I am quite innocent of the villainy?"

"No, my boy," said Mr. Harling.

"Thank you," said Gerald, glancing away. "But things looked very black against me, and still look. I only heard of the poor girl's disappearance when I returned here the other day, and I have decided to remain here until I have found her and proved my innocence."

"Good, very good!" said Mr. Harling. "That's just what I should expect you to do, my lad."

"I came back by the merest chance," said Gerald, "to see Miss Sartoris"—his tone softened at the name—"to give her some papers belonging to her, that I had by accident."

"Miss Sartoris, the owner of the Court?" said Mr. Harling. Gerald nodded.

Mr. Harling was silent for a moment or two, and then he said: "Lord Wharton left it to her, didn't he?"

"He did," said Gerald.

"Rather strange, that," remarked Mr. Harling.

"No," said Gerald, up in arms for Claire at once. "He adopted her when she was a little girl; he had no near relatives; it was only right that he should make her his heir-ess."

Mr. Harling looked at him fixedly. "No near relatives?" he said.

"No," said Gerald.

"Has Miss Sartoris a sister?" asked Mr. Harling, after a pause.

Gerald replied in the negative. "Why do you ask?"

Mr. Harling mumbled something in response and turned to look at the view. They were nearing the Court by this time, and the exquisite beauty of its surroundings seemed to impress the old gentleman very much. Presently a portion of the great house came in sight.

"It is a magnificent place, magnificent!" he exclaimed under his breath. "Surely it must be one of the finest places in England?"

"It is," assented Gerald.

"And it all belongs to this Miss Sartoris?"

"Everything," said Gerald. "The house, all the land as far as you can see, and further, the village down there in the hollow—isn't it quaint? Even the fishing-smacks in the bay there."

"She must be a kind of queen!" remarked Mr. Harling.

"She is," said Gerald, with a deeper note in his voice.

They went past the lodge gates and down toward the village. At the head of the steep street they got out, and Gerald conducted Mr. Harling down the steps. He looked about him with the deepest interest.

"Where are you staying?" he asked.

Gerald pointed to the cottage. Mr. Harling looked at him with the same curiously intent gaze.

"That is where the poor girl and her father lived," said Gerald.

"I shall stay at the inn for a night or two," said Mr. Harling.

Gerald promptly went in and ordered a meal and a comfortable room. They returned to the fly to drive round the celebrated avenue which wound in serpentine fashion round the Court grounds, Mr. Harling exclaiming at the beauty of the scene at every point. As they came up to one of the lodges, he said: "Could I see the Court?"

"Oh, yes," said Gerald. "Miss Sartoris is always very glad for visitors to go round the place. In a sense, it almost belongs to the public."

"Oh, does it?" said Mr. Harling, quaintly, and he muttered to himself as they came suddenly upon the front of the house, stretching in a long line against the sky.

They drove up to the door, and Mr. Harling got out. The hall-porter came to meet them.

"Is Miss Sartoris within?" asked Mr. Harling. He turned to Gerald quickly. "I should like to thank the young lady for permitting me to see this beautiful place."

"Miss Sartoris is not at home, sir," said the hall-porter.

"Miss Sartoris is away," said Gerald at the same moment.

"I would have told you that, if I had known—"

"I beg pardon," said Mr. Harling. "I saw that the house looked occupied—"

"Mr. Sapley is living here," explained Gerald, quickly. The hall-porter stood looking from one to the other.

"Would the gentleman like to come in, sir?" he suggested.

Mr. Harling said he should like very much; and they entered the hall. The old gentleman looked round him with a sort of admiring awe. He had often read of such a place, but had never seen one; the magnificent hall, suffused with the winter light filtered through the richly stained windows, impressed him to a remarkable extent.

The butler came forward and bowing to Gerald, threw open the drawing-room door and invited them to enter. In a similar way Mr. Harling was shown all the principal rooms—"state" rooms, as the servants were fond of calling them; and he gazed about him in silent admiration. The butler was gratified by the effect produced.

"Perhaps the gentleman would like to see the pictures, sir?" he said. And he led them up the broad stairs to the corridor, and, with a gracious dignity, pointed out the more famous of the masterpieces.

"Family portraits, sir," he said, and he rolled off some of the historic names. Mr. Harling walked along in the usual fashion, nodding now and again, and evidently greatly interested. As they came to the last, Lord Wharton's portrait, he stopped, and looked at it with an intense and indescribable expression on his weather-beaten face.

"The Right Honorable Algernon Edward Vincent Gerald Wharton, Earl of Wharton," reeled off the butler, with solemn pride.

Mr. Harling seemed scarcely able to withdraw his eyes from the picture. At last he said in a constrained voice: "Is that the last of the portraits?"

"It is, sir," said the butler. "Lord Wharton was the last earl. He was never married, and the title is now extinct."

"In—deed!" said Mr. Harling. He looked round him, as if searching for something, and the butler politely paused on the way down.

"Is there a portrait of Miss Sartoris here?" asked Mr. Harling.

"I regret to say that there is not, sir," said the butler.

"Miss Sartoris is a very beautiful young lady, if I may make so bold to say so—as Mr. Wayre knows—and her portrait would be a great ornament amongst the others."

Gerald colored and averted his face, and said nothing. As they descended the stairs, old Sapley came out of the library and shuffled across the hall. He glanced up at them, then disappeared by the outer door at the back of the hall.

"Who is that?" asked Mr. Harling in an undertone.

"Mr. Sapley, the agent," replied Gerald in as low a voice.

Mr. Harling rubbed his chin and said nothing. They reached the door, and he turned to thank the butler, when Mordaunt Sapley came up the step. His head was bent, and he did not see them for a moment, and he looked up with a start; and Gerald almost started also, for the man's face—seen for the instant without its mask—was white and haggard, as if he had just heard bad news. It was the day after Jenks' visit.

"My friend—Mr. Harling—has been looking at the rooms and the pictures," explained Gerald. "This is Mr. Mordaunt Sapley," he added to Mr. Harling.

Mordaunt had slipped the mask on by that time, and he smiled amiably. "My father will be very pleased," he said. "Pray take your friend over the grounds or wherever you like to go."

"Thanks!" said Gerald. Mordaunt Sapley bowed and passed into the hall.

"Very polite gentleman," said Mr. Harling, when he and Gerald had got out of hearing. "He and his father—I suppose the old man we saw in the hall was his father?—seem to be very much at home. He spoke as if the place belonged to them."

"Yes," said Gerald, with a frown. "I don't understand—" He didn't finish the sentence.

Mr. Harling dismissed the fly—Gerald deciding to walk into Thraxton, and they went toward the west wing.

"That's the wing I was at work on," said Gerald, rather grimly. "Let us come away, if you've seen enough of it. I have some unpleasant associations connected with it."

"Let us go back to the inn," said Mr. Harling. He was singularly silent on their way, and seemed extremely thoughtful. When they sat down to the meal which had been prepared for them, he said, suddenly:

"When is Miss Sartoris coming back?"

"I don't know," said Gerald. "No one seems to know. I was going to say that there was a kind of mystery about her."

absence, but the expression would be scarcely justified, excepting by the fact that no one knows her address, not even the Sapleys."

Mr. Harling poured himself out a glass of ale. "It's rather singular," he said. "By the way, isn't it rather odd, too, that there's no portrait of her up at the Court? I'm rather disappointed; it's only natural that one should want to see what the mistress of such a grand place is like."

"Are you so very curious?" said Gerald, rather hesitatingly, and putting his hand into his breast-pocket.

"Yes, I am," responded Mr. Harling, decisively.

"There you are, then!" said Gerald; and he pushed the pencil sketch of Claire across the table. "It's a sketch I took of her, without her knowing it, some months ago. It's an awful libel on her, Heaven knows, and yet it's like her—like her enough to give you an idea— Good Lord, look out!" he broke off, snatching up the sketch. For Mr. Harling had, with unusual awkwardness, let his glass of ale slip out of his hand.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Tut, tut! how clumsy of me! I hope it hasn't gone on the picture," he added, as he mopped up the spilled beer. "Let me look at it again, will you?"

"There you are!" said Gerald. "It's all right. I set a value on it far beyond the worth of the miserable sketch. Well, what do you think of it?"

Mr. Harling, aided by his knowledge of the circumstances, had recognized the school-mistress of Streatham. He was lost in amazement and bewilderment, and absently exclaimed: "It's the image of her!"

"What!" said Gerald. "You've never seen her?"

Mr. Harling colored, and got up to ring for more ale. "I mean, that I dare say it's the image of her, only you're too modest to say so, my boy," he said, laughing curiously.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

GERALD took back the sketch and gazed at it, with a lover's look in his eyes, for a moment or two in silence; then he said, as if he had suddenly made up his mind:

"Look here, sir, I feel as if I'd got to tell you—you have been so kind to me, and I feel, somehow, as if you were the best friend I have in the world—and, indeed, I've no one else to tell, and the thing is like a burden upon me. This lady,

Miss Sartoris, the mistress of Court Regna—well, I've been mad enough to fall in love with her."

Mr. Harling had half suspected this, and he sighed, for he thought of Grace and her hopeless love, and, father-like, suffered a pang on her account; but he was a generous-hearted man, and he liked Gerald—indeed, had grown very fond of him for more reasons than the all-sufficient one that he had saved Grace's life.

"Go on, my boy," he said, encouragingly.

"I'm half ashamed to," said Gerald, "for it must sound so preposterous to you. You have seen Court Regna; you know how rich she is; how lofty the position she occupies there; and you know what I am."

"Yes, I know what you are," said Mr. Harling, quietly. Gerald lighted his pipe.

"A penniless adventurer," he went—"a mere nobody; it was madness, of course, but I can no more help it than I can help breathing. You have no idea what she is like."

"Haven't I? No; I suppose not."

"This ridiculous sketch doesn't give the least idea of her. She is one of the loveliest of God's creatures, and as good as she is beautiful. I met her by chance, and was thrown into daily communication with her while I was renewing that west wing; why, no man could help loving her if he had seen her as often as I did! There is a nameless charm about her which only those could understand who came under its spell. She is very proud, but not in a vulgar way; she is humble enough in some things, and, like yourself and Miss Grace, thinks very little of wealth; and I suppose because of that, and—and because she was gracious enough to be friendly and kind to me, I 'up and told her of my love,' as the song says."

"And what did she say?" asked Mr. Harling, deeply interested.

"She said, 'No!'" said Gerald, stifling a sigh, and smoking hard. "The night before I had ventured to call her by her name, and I had gone away from her, hoping— Ah! well, the next morning, all my hopes were slain. She said 'No!' and I left her."

"She didn't care for you?" said Mr. Harling.

"I suppose not," assented Gerald, with a grim smile.

"You don't speak with certainty?"

Gerald colored.

"Don't think me a coxcomb," he said. "Frankly, I have always had a vague kind of hope that she—she didn't dislike me."

"Then why—" asked Mr. Harling.

Gerald shook his head.

"I can't tell you. I thought for a moment or two, the other day, that it was because of this scandal about this poor girl, Lucy Hawker. But I remembered that Miss Sartoris could have heard nothing of that when she refused me."

"Why didn't you ask her again, lad?" said Mr. Harling.

"I've not seen her," said Gerald. "I left the place at once." He told the story of the broken leg. "When I came back she was gone, as you know; and if I had asked her again, I feel that she would have given me the same answer. I know there's no hope for me; she's the only woman I shall ever love; there's not a day that I don't think of her; in fact, I carry her about with me in my heart just as I carry her sketch in my pocket."

Mr. Harling seemed about to speak, and then checked himself, and after a pause, said:

"Nobody knows where she is?"

Gerald shook his head.

"As you say, that seems to me rather extraordinary. And it's very extraordinary that the Sapleys should be living in that big house of hers. My boy, I don't like the look of those two men; I'm not given to fancies, but I've taken a red-hot dislike to both of 'em. The old man, with that hawk-like face of his, looks capable of anything; and the son, though he's not a bad-looking chap, had a hang-dog countenance when we first saw him to-day. You—you don't suspect any foul play, Gerald?"

Gerald frowned, and smoked furiously.

"What foul play could there be?" he said. "You don't suppose they've put Miss Sartoris out of the way?" And he laughed at the grotesqueness of the idea.

"No, I don't," replied Mr. Harling; "though, upon my soul, both father and son look capable of it."

Gerald laughed again.

"Scarcely that!" he said. "But I wish I knew where she is."

Mr. Harling again seemed about to blurt out something, and again checked himself.

"She may come back soon," said Gerald. "I may be here—for I shall not go away, excepting for a day or two, for the purposes of my search—until this mystery of Lucy's disappearance is solved. I shall see her once more, and give her *my papers* I have of hers, and then—then I shall go back to

Lartree, and finish Miss Grace's portrait, and set off on the tramp again."

Mr. Harling looked at him curiously.

"You will make your fortune yet, my boy," he said. "Your sort always does in the end. Keep up your heart!" He leaned across the table, and patted Gerald on the shoulder. "Things may come all right, after all; who knows!"

Gerald shook his head.

"A fortune wouldn't be much use to me without her!" he said. The talk had upset him, and he paced up and down the room restlessly.

"I have to go into Thraxton about this business of Lucy Hawker's. You won't mind me leaving you? You'll find plenty to interest and amuse you if you stroll about this place."

"Off with you, lad!" said Mr. Harling. "I shall find plenty to amuse me."

After Gerald had gone, the old man sat staring at the fire, and rubbing his chin; then, with an air of resolution, he suddenly jumped up, put on his hat and coat, and walked out toward the Court. He stopped now and again on his way, and looked hard at the ground, as if he were thinking deeply and was not quite clear as to his course of action. When he reached the Court he asked for Mr. Sapley, "The old gentleman, please."

A footman took him into the library. Old Sapley was sitting at the table, with his head sunk between his shoulders, very like a hawk, indeed. Mordaunt's "illness," and his extraordinary behavior on the preceding night, had affected the old man very much indeed, and he was still brooding over it when his visitor was announced. He gazed up at Mr. Harling morosely, and repeated the name several times, as if trying to remember it, then he shook his head.

"I don't know you," he said. "It's my son Mordaunt you want to see, I expect?"

"No; it's you, Mr. Sapley," said Mr. Harling, taking the chair which old Sapley motioned him to. "I am a stranger to you, and I will state my business at once. I am a friend of Miss Sartoris's."

Old Sapley started slightly, and a sharp look came into his cunning eyes.

"I'm glad to see any friend of Miss Sartoris's," he said, "though I never heard your name. Harling—Harling!" he repeated. "But my memory's bad lately. What can I do for you?"

"As a friend of Miss Sartoris's—" began Mr. Harling.

Old Sapley, watching him intently, broke in, his eyes growing shifty, as he rubbed his hands one over the other:

"If you've come here on her behalf, Mr. Harling, I'm afraid you've come too late."

"Too late?" echoed Mr. Harling.

"Yes," said old Sapley, showing his fangs in a senile sign of triumph. "When we offered Miss Sartoris terms, she would have been wise to have taken them; circumstances have altered since then. I don't say that my son, Mordy—I mean, Mr. Mordaunt Sapley"—he corrected himself promptly—"wouldn't marry her even now; but there's no need for it. You may have heard of my son, Mr. Harling? He's one of the principal men in the place; he's standing for the county; you may have read his address? My son is a clever man; he's trying to be a great one. He could do better than marry Claire Sartoris!"

To say that Mr. Harling was filled with surprise would be but to inadequately describe his amazement. Mr. Sapley saw it, but, ascribing it to a different cause, chuckled with malicious enjoyment.

"She should have taken him when she could have got him!" he said. "I made her the offer myself, though I was dead against it. But Mordy had a fancy for the girl, and I didn't want to balk him—I never refused him anything; I've been a good father to Mordy, a good father—a good father!" he maundered off, almost childishly.

Mr. Harling sat speechless, and Mr. Sapley pulled himself together again, and went on:

"So, as I say, it's too late. My son can look higher. I shouldn't be surprised if he married a title. There's a good many daughters of poor peers about; lots of 'em would jump at my son with his money and his position!"

Mr. Harling wiped his forehead. Was the old man mad? "I don't understand, Mr. Sapley!" he said.

"Oh, I see!" said old Sapley. "You've come about money—the allowance he offered her?"

"You offered Miss Sartoris money?" said Mr. Harling. Yes, certainly, the old man must be mad!

Mr. Sapley nodded, then looked up sideways with a grin.

"She's come down a peg or two, has she?" he said. "I thought she would. Nothing like poverty for bringing down high stomachs; we've humbled her pride, have we? Lord, how we suffered enough from it, Mordy and I! Well, I've come on a poor errand, Mr. Harling. The offer was

made without prejudice, as we lawyers say, and it's withdrawn. She treated it with scorn, and she's humbled herself too late. You tell her, from me, that she won't get any allowance out of us; she'll have to work for her living, as many a better woman has done." He chuckled, and looked at Mr. Harling cunningly. "Perhaps she thinks that there'll be something left after the mortgage and the bonds are satisfied. If so, tell her not to count on that, for there won't be a penny left when our claims are satisfied!"

"Your claims?" began Mr. Harling; but old Sapley interrupted him:

"She has told you all about it, I suppose. You're a lawyer, eh?"

Mr. Harling did not contradict him. Indeed, old Sapley, in his triumph, did not wait.

"Well, I'm not afraid. Everything's straightforward. You won't find a flaw, a screw loose. We've given her formal notice of foreclosure, and shall sell off when the notice terminates." He laughed, and rubbed his hands. "Of course we shall take over the place ourselves."

"I see!" said Mr. Harling, and, indeed, he did see the whole of the cunningly planned business. "I will tell Miss Sartoris what you say."

"Ah, do!" said old Sapley, insolently.

Mr. Harling rose. "Will you tell me the total of Miss Sartoris's indebtedness to you, Mr. Sapley?"

Old Sapley took out a pocket-book and consulted it, and gave the amount. "Pretty large, eh?" he said, with a grin.

"It is, it is—very large!" assented Mr. Harling. "I am much obliged to you, Mr. Sapley, for the—information you have given me."

"You're welcome!" said Mr. Sapley.

"And I will only trouble you further to give me the date of the foreclosure."

Old Sapley gave it to him. "Very close, ain't it?" he said.

"Very!" assented Mr. Harling. "I will wish you good-day now, Mr. Sapley."

Old Sapley nodded curtly. "Good-day. I'm afraid you haven't done much good, eh?" And he leered up at him. "I should recommend you to throw up the case; you'll make nothing out of it. I give you that advice as a brother professional. Needy clients bring no wool, eh? Throw it up!"

"Thank you for your advice, Mr. Sapley!" said Mr. Harling. "I will consider it. Good-day." He was at

struggling with his amazement when he got outside, and though he stood and looked at the house, it is scarcely too much to say that he did not see it. "The old scoundrel!" he murmured to himself, as he walked along. "The in-fer-nal scoundrel! That poor girl! To think that she's teaching school while that old carrion-crow is perching in that pretty nest of hers! It's desecration, that's what it is! And he'd got it all so cut and dried, and be-*cauti-fully* arranged! Why, it's like a romance! Yes, you must come over to the old country if you want romance. The bald-headed old vulture!"

But presently his anger and indignation gave place to anticipatory satisfaction, and he smiled to himself as he trotted along the road toward the inn.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

GERALD came back from Thraxton late in the evening. He looked somewhat disappointed and discouraged.

"Well, lad," said Mr. Harling. "Come and sit down and have a glass of toddy. What news?"

Gerald drew his chair up to the fire, and pushed the hair from his forehead. "Oh, not satisfactory!" he said. "The inspector can't help me. He said it's not a matter for the police at all. No offense against the law has been committed, and, therefore, the police can not take the affair up. He pointed out that if they were to undertake to find every girl who ran off with her lover, they would have their hands pretty full. If she'd taken any of her father's goods they would have been justified in trying to find her. Or if there was any reason to suspect foul play, it would, of course, be their business to follow the matter up."

"And you don't suspect foul play?" said Mr. Harling.

"Oh, no," said Gerald. "Why should I? The inspector suggested that I should employ a private detective, and get a good man down from London."

"Well, why not?" said Mr. Harling.

Gerald colored, and looked hard at the fire. "Well, for one thing," he said, "I haven't the means; and for another, I have a repugnance to bringing a strange detective into Regna and making the poor girl's story public."

"As regards the money," said Mr. Harling, "I should like it as a favor if you'll let me find that. When I say a favor, I mean it; I'm very much interested in anything that concerns you, my boy, and this concerns you very deeply."

Besides, I like to do a little good with my money, if I can; it's a luxury. You run up to London, and see a first-rate detective. You needn't bring him down; but just lay the case before him; he may be able to give you a hint."

"Very well, I will, sir," said Gerald. "And thank you. And while I am in London, I should like to go and see Miss Grace, if you'll give me her address."

Mr. Harling hadn't thought of this, and he rubbed his chin and looked rather confused; but there was no help for it.

"She'll be very glad to see you, my lad," he said. "Arundel House, Streatham—just outside London."

They sat and talked until a late hour—but Mr. Harling said nothing of his second visit to the Court—and then Gerald went off to the cottage. He saw Jenks just outside.

"I am going up to London to-morrow, Jenks," he said. He was just about to add, "to see a detective," but pulled himself up in time.

"Are you indeed, sir?" said Jenks. "Ain't heard o' nothing fresh, sir, I suppose?"

Gerald shook his head, and Jenks, with a "good-night," sauntered on.

Mr. Harling went to see Gerald off by the train the next morning, and at the last moment put a letter into Gerald's hand.

"I wish you'd run into my bankers—London and Westminster—with that, Gerald," he said. "You'll get there before they close."

Gerald promised. Mr. Harling wrung his hand affectionately, and the train started. Gerald took a cab straight to the bank, and handed in the note. It was received with the respect which is generally accorded to communications from a millionaire, and the manager came out to say:

"Certainly, certainly! We will do what Mr. Harling asks, to any amount; I will write him to that effect."

As Streatham was so near London, Gerald thought that he would go down there after he had seen the detective, and put up at a hotel in the place, so that he might call upon Miss Grace the next morning. He went down to the office of a well-known detective, and had an interview with the famous man, who listened to him without interrupting, and remarked, quietly, at the finish of Gerald's statement:

"I'm afraid there has been foul play, Mr. Wayre."

Gerald was startled. "Good heavens! why?" he said.

"I will tell you," said the detective. "When a girl runs away, she invariably communicates with her people; sooner or

later she writes a few lines, or else she comes back to them. If the man marries her she goes back as proud as Punch; if he deserts her, she writes, as I say. Now, this girl was not one of the hard and vicious sort?"

"No, no!" said Gerald.

"Just so; and she wouldn't leave her father without a word. I speak from experience; I've had hundreds of similar cases through my hands, and I've always found that they've worked out as I say."

"But—but," said Gerald, "what is it you suspect?"

"That the girl has been made away with," said the detective in a matter-of-fact tone.

Gerald went pale. "I can scarcely imagine that," he said. "What am I to do? Where am I to look?"

"Well, of course, I should say 'send me down there,'" replied the detective, with a smile. "But I can easily understand your reluctance to do so. If you want a hint, I say—look for your man at Court Regna!"

Gerald shook his head. "I have looked for him there; I know every man in the place; there is no man there capable of such a deed."

The detective smiled and glanced at his watch. "All the same, I think you'll find I'm right, Mr. Wayre," he said. "You go back there and keep your eyes open. If you want me, send me a wire, and I'll come down by the next train and find a clew."

"There doesn't seem to be any clew," said Gerald, despairingly.

"I beg your pardon, there is always a clew," said the detective, cheerfully, "and it's just in spotting them that we detectives have the pull over you amateurs. Good-afternoon. And thank you."

Gerald took the train for Streatham. He would see Miss Grace and go back to Regna at once; the least he could do would be to follow the detective's advice. As he was inquiring his way to the hotel, outside the station he saw a small crowd collected at the corner of a street. He had to pass it on his way to the hotel, and he stopped to see what was the matter. In the center of the crowd a small boy was lying in the road; a Sister of Mercy was kneeling beside him, quite regardless of the mud, with his head upon her arm; and a brewer's dray standing beside the pavement, its driver staring helplessly and despondently at the boy, made the accident plain to Gerald.

He pushed his way through the gaping crowd, and addressed

the Sister of Mercy. "Is he very much hurt?" he asked. "Can I help you?"

She raised her head and looked at him, and Gerald was struck by the sweetness of the pale, deeply lined face—so greatly impressed that, for a second, he forgot the object of his inquiries.

The sister, too, seemed startled, either by his sudden presence, or the question, and her sad, placid eyes rested on his face with a half-frightened, half-inquiring gaze; but she recovered herself in an instant or two, and said in a low voice:

"He has been run over, and has fainted; I am waiting until he has sufficiently recovered to remove him. There is a village hospital in the next street, and I will have him taken there."

Gerald bent down on the other side of the boy, and gently moved his arms and legs.

"I don't think there are any bones broken," he said.

"I think we might move him now," said the sister, after a little time. "If you will get a cab—"

Gerald picked the boy up in his arms very tenderly and carefully.

"I think he'll travel better this way," he said. "I sha'n't jolt him so much."

The sister walked a little in front of him to show him the way, the crowd, of course, followed them open-mouthed. Gerald carried the child into the neat little room of the village hospital, and the doctor came in.

"I will wait outside, and hear what is amiss with him," said Gerald.

Presently the sister came out to him.

"He is not very much hurt," she said. "He was half stunned by striking his head when he was knocked down, and very frightened. Would you like to see him?"

Gerald said he should, and he followed her in. The boy, very large-eyed and pale, looked inclined to whimper; but Gerald addressed him in just the proper tone, and so arrested the tears.

"Well, my little man?" he said. "I'm glad to see you are not very much hurt after all." He sat down beside him and took his hand. "I suppose his people are coming?" he said to the sister in an undertone.

"He's an orphan," said Sister Agnes. "But I will take charge of him."

"Then he will do very well," said Gerald.

Sister Agnes, from the other side of the bed, raised her eye

and looked at Gerald's handsome, sun-tanned face with a nervousness that was quite foreign to her; and Gerald, as he met her gaze, felt the same strange sensation of which he had been conscious when he first saw her face. There was a troubled and preoccupied expression in her eyes, and her hand trembled as it smoothed the counterpane.

"You have been very kind," she said. "I have not thanked you yet!"

Gerald smiled.

"I've done very little," he said. "He will need all his thanks for you, mother."

He had addressed her by the maternal title often accorded to the sisters of the poor; but it seemed to have a strange effect upon her. She grew deathly pale, her lips quivered, and Gerald fancied that the sad, patient eyes had grown suddenly moist.

"I am called sister," she said.

"I beg your pardon," he said, reverently. "But I expect you are mother as well as sister to many of these poor folk. May I know your name?"

"I am called Sister Agnes," she said in a low voice.

"Sister Agnes!" he repeated, as reverently as before. "May I come in to see the little fellow again?" he asked. "I am staying here for a day or two. I am a stranger here, and putting up at the hotel."

She seemed to listen as if she were listening to something more than his words, and it was evident that she was battling with an agitation quite unusual with her.

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "He will be glad to see you. I shall keep him here until he has quite recovered."

Gerald rose, but was conscious of a strange reluctance to go. Something about this sad-faced, white-haired Sister of Mercy cast a kind of spell over him. He knew that he had never seen her before, and yet it seemed to him as if he had not only seen her, but known her very well. He attributed this peculiar feeling to the influence, subtle and not to be described, exercised by her sacred calling, and the patient sadness and gentleness of her voice and manner. For the sake of saying something, an excuse for lingering, he said:

"Can you tell me the way to Arundel House?"

She raised her eyes to his, with a half-startled questioning, and her lips moved for a moment or two without speech. *She told him.*

"Are you going there?" she asked. "You have friends there?"

"Yes," said Gerald. "I am going to see a young lady named Harling."

She repeated the name, then sunk into the chair beside the couch, with her head bent and her hands clasped together. Gerald was alarmed, and thought that she was ill.

He went round to her and bent over her.

"Are you ill?" he asked. "This has upset you. Can I get you a glass of water?"

She rose, but looked so fragile, so tremulous, and likely to fall, that Gerald ventured to put his hand upon her arm supportingly. She trembled still more, and looked into his face with a half-fearful, half-yearning expression in her eyes.

"It's all right," said Gerald in his cheery way, and yet with a tenderness and gentleness which brought the tears to her eyes. "There's no need to be troubled about him; the little fellow is all right. Sit down and rest; I'll send the nurse to you."

She had, perhaps unconsciously, put her hand upon his. She drew it away now, and turned her head aside so that the veil hid her face.

"No, no!" she said. "I am all right. Do not send for her; I would rather be alone."

Gerald's hand lingered on her arm for a moment or two. He also was agitated.

"I will come again," he said, and slowly left the room.

When he had gone, Sister Agnes covered her white face with her hand.

"What is it?" she moaned to herself. "The voice, the face, seemed to go to my heart! Why did I not ask him his name? And he is going to see some people of the name of Harling. Oh, I am in deep waters, deep waters!" Her lips moved in silent prayer for a moment or two, but when the nurse re-entered, Sister Agnes was as calm and placid—though paler than usual perhaps—as was her wont.

Gerald went to the hotel and got some dinner. All through the meal his meeting with Sister Agnes haunted and troubled him; and when he went to sleep, he dreamed that she was standing beside the bed, and was bending over him with a look on her face which one sees in the pictured faces of the saints.

After breakfast, the next morning, he made his way to Arundel House. The street was full of children, for it was Saturday, and a holiday, and Gerald, who was fond of children, looked at them as he threaded his way through the

groups, with a pleasant smile. He was told that Miss Harling was in.

"At least, I think she is, sir," said the servant. "If you'll come upstairs." She opened the drawing-room door, and Gerald entered. A lady was sitting with her back to the light. She was reading, and did not look up for the moment, and Gerald went toward her with "Miss Grace!" on his lips, then he stopped dead short, as if he had been shot.

The lady looked up, uttered an exclamation, and so they stared at each other for the space of a second, in breathless silence. Gerald was the first to speak.

"Claire—Miss Sartoris!" he exclaimed, as if he could not believe that she was really there, within a few paces of him; and, indeed, he could not.

The book dropped from Claire's lap as she rose. All the color had fled from her face, and her lips were tightly compressed, as if her heart were throbbing painfully.

"Mr. Wayre!" she said. The sight of her agitation increased his.

"You here, Miss Sartoris!" he said. "How is this?"

Claire was making a tremendous effort to regain her self-possession. The sight of him set every nerve in her body thrilling, as the strings of a harp thrill to the touch of a familiar hand.

"Why should I not be here, Mr. Wayre?" she said, trying to speak coldly. Her manner aroused Gerald's spirit. After all, he had endured a great deal at her hands, and even a worm will turn if you tread on it too hard.

"Miss Sartoris," he said, "you speak to me, you look at me—even at this moment of surprise, when we meet, to our mutual astonishment—as if I had committed some capital crime, or offended you beyond hope of pardon!"

Claire bit her lip. "You did not come to see me?" she asked.

"No," he said, almost sternly; "I came to see Miss Harling."

"She is a friend of mine; I am staying with her. I will go and fetch her."

"One moment, if you please, Miss Sartoris!" said Gerald, rather gravely. "I am aware that I have no right to ask the question, but—well, I flattered myself that you once honored me with your friendship, and I will, therefore, venture to ask you why you have left the Court, concealed your address, and caused your friends—I am thinking of others besides *self*—great anxiety?"

Claire looked down, but made no reply.

"Very well," he said, "I take your silence as an intimation that it is no business of mine; but, Miss Sartoris, I have now to ask you a question which I deem I have a right to put."

Claire began to tremble. And yet how sweet to her was the voice, stern, and almost angry, as it was!

"The last time I saw you I had the audacity to tell you that I loved you."

The color rose to Claire's face, and her eyes began to glow under her lids.

"It was an audacity, I admit, and very likely you only treated me as I deserved to be treated."

Claire's lips parted, as if she were about to speak, but she remained silent.

"You dismissed me very promptly, very haughtily. As I said, I have no right to complain of that, but I do complain of your after treatment of me, and I am so loath to believe that it was inspired by a pride quite unworthy of you that I feel that it is only just to you to give you an opportunity of telling me why you have treated me so cruelly. What have I done—beyond daring to love you—that merits such treatment?"

He had poured all this out in a kind of "stand and deliver" way, but it was evident that he was deeply agitated by her presence, by the sight of the lovely face which was never out of his dreams.

Claire went very pale. "I do not deny that right, Mr. Wayre," she said, "and if you insist upon an answer, I will tell you why my—our—friendship—should cease."

"Tell me, please!" said Gerald, curtly.

"In one word, then," said Claire, almost inaudibly: "What has become of Lucy Hawker?"

Though he had half expected this, Gerald was staggered. "You—you believed it, then?" he said. He was silent for a moment, fighting with his indignation; then he said, with a forced calm: "You believed that I was guilty? Well!" he laughed bitterly, "after all, it's not so wonderful! The evidence was very strong; I left the place the same day—and yet surely there must have been *some* doubt in your mind! Couldn't you, in common charity, have given me the benefit of that doubt?"

The appeal went straight to Claire's heart, but she tried to steel herself. "I saw you with her in the park the night you—you left me!" she said, slowly, painfully.

Gerald stared at her. "Well! I do not care! The girl came up to me, mistaking me for some one else; she was in trouble. I comforted her, as I would comfort and console any helpless woman, child, dog—what you will!" Then his eyes flashed and his face grew crimson. "Good heavens! Did you think me capable of uttering words of love to you one moment, and—and intriguing with a village girl the very next? Why, no one in this wide world could be such a monster of treachery and deceit!"

Claire *had* believed it; but now she believed it no longer. There was truth in his voice, in his flashing eyes. A hot wave of shame, remorse, self-loathing, swept over her. Oh, if she had but seen him before! Why had she not sent for him? Why had she not— But what was the use of asking foolish questions now? There he stood, a strong man, filled with just wrath and indignation, and she was a cowering, remorseful woman, aching with love, and the desire of forgiveness. She longed to throw herself into his arms, to sink at his feet, to plead for one look, one word of the old love she had cast away for pride's sake; but she felt powerless to move, and no word would pass her lips.

And Gerald, half blinded by his anger and misery, did not understand what was passing through her heart. "Very well!" he said. "You have answered me, Miss Sartoris. It only remains for me to tell you that you have still some justification for your suspicions, but—" At this moment the door opened, and Grace ran in.

"Whatever is the matter?" she began; and then, at sight of Gerald, she stopped and looked from one to the other with an intense questioning. Then she said: "You know him? You are friends?"

"No, Miss Grace!" broke out Gerald. "We *were* friends, but Miss Sartoris has withdrawn her friendship. My meeting with her here is quite unexpected. I came to see you. I will come again. Miss Sartoris"—he turned to Claire—"I will only add one word to what I have already said. I left Regna on that day in one of the coasting vessels—the 'Susan.' She is on a voyage now, but she may return any day. The hour she sails into Regna harbor my innocence of the dastardly crime of which you have deemed me guilty, will be clearly *proved*. Good-day!"

He strode from the room, leaving the two girls standing like two leaves round which a storm has been sweeping. There was silence for a minute or two, then Grace crept up to

Claire, and putting her hands on Claire's shoulders, looked up into her face.

"Claire!" she whispered. "It is you—you he loves!" There was a pause as her eyes dwelt on Claire's searchingly; then she added: "*And you love him!*"

"Yes," said Claire, wofully. "I—I love him—and I have lost him!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

GERALD went away from Arundel House fuming. At sight of Claire his love for her rose flame-like, and devoured him. That she should have thought him guilty of such hideous treachery and deceit—that she should have doubted the sincerity of his love for her, and deemed him capable of bestowing a thought upon another woman, drove him mad.

"I've seen her for the last time!" he said to himself; and then he groaned; for, oh, how he loved her! How beautiful, how queenly, and yet how sweet she was!

He loved her better, more passionately than ever. Well, he'd go away. Directly he had solved the mystery of Lucy's disappearance he would leave England, and never come back to it.

He was so agitated and bewildered that he did not ask himself why Claire was living in London, and why she had concealed her address; and he walked about the pretty streets and commons of Streatham like a man half demented.

After awhile he remembered the injured lad and his promise to go and see him. He went round to the village hospital, and found the boy very much better. While he was sitting beside him and talking to him in that way that children love, Sister Agnes came in. She looked very pale, and even sadder than she had done the day before, and she stopped short when she saw him, as if his presence startled her. Gerald felt again the peculiar sensation—the indefinable interest—which had been aroused when first he saw her.

"You have come," she said. "He is very much better; he has been talking of you, and been wishing to thank you."

She bent over the child and kissed him, then sunk into the chair on the opposite side of the bed to Gerald. They talked for some few minutes, as much to the boy as to each other, and presently the lad fell asleep, lulled, perhaps, by the sister's softly placid voice. Suddenly, yet gently, Sister Agnes said:

"You are looking ill this morning; are you ill?"

Gerald was rather startled by the question, gently as it was put.

"No," he said; then an impulse, a man's craving for a woman's sympathy, took possession of him. "No, I'm not ill; but I am in trouble."

"I am sorry!" she murmured in a low voice. "I wish—I wish that I could help you. Do not deem me presumptuous. The weakest and most insignificant of us can help—sometimes—the strongest and most self-reliant."

"Well," he said, with a miserable little laugh, "I've just quarreled with the woman I love. I'm afraid that you will think that a trifling kind of trouble; but it's a very big one to me, and is almost unendurable. What is it the poet says? 'To be wroth with those we love doth work like madness in the brain.' I don't know whether I've got it quite correctly, but it just expresses what I feel."

"Perhaps you will make it up and 'be friends' again," she said, softly, and with a deep interest in her voice and eyes.

Gerald shook his head and sighed.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "I'm afraid I've seen her for the last time. I shall leave England very soon, and—I don't know why I tell you this, Sister Agnes, but somehow I feel as if—as if we were not strangers, as if we had known each other for a long time.

She bent her head.

"I am glad to hear you say that," she said, almost inaudibly. "I wish I could help you."

He sighed.

"Thank you—thank you! But no one can help me, I'm afraid. It's just a piece of bad luck."

"There is no such thing as luck, chance," she murmured. "'There is a Divinity doth shape our ends, rough-hew them how we will.' We are all in the hands of a ruling Providence who guides our weak and blundering steps to the appointed end."

"Mine have been weak and blundering enough," he said. "I'm a kind of waif and stray—one of those straws that get blown about the world by every puff of wind."

"You speak as if you were alone in the world," she said, after a pause.

"I am," said Gerald, rather sadly. "I haven't a relation that I know of—"

"Your father—mother?" she asked, with head still bent, *and face hidden from him by her veil.*

"Both dead. I never knew them. I should have been a

better man—and a happier—if my mother had been left to me. I've never heard a chum speak of his mother without feeling a pang of envy. But I'm boring you, sister. This little chap sleeps soundly, doesn't he?"

As he spoke, he smoothed the sheet under the pointed little chin. In doing so he let his hand linger on the bed; it happened to be the left, and the ring he wore—the ring Claire had found for him in the room of the west wing—shone conspicuously against the whiteness of the counterpane. The sister's eyes rested on it absently enough for a moment; then suddenly she bent forward, gazing at the ring as if spell-bound.

"That—that is a handsome ring you wear," she said. "Will—will you let me look at it?"

"Certainly!" said Gerald; and he took it off and held it out to her. She took it after a moment, and examined it. He could not see her face, or its pallor would have alarmed him.

"Have you had—where did you get it? Forgive me; but—" she broke off, as if she could not frame the question.

"The ring? I've had it ever since I was a boy," he said, easily.

"To whom did it belong?" she asked in a subdued voice.

"To my father or mother; I don't know which. The people who took charge of me gave it to me, and, strange to say, I have kept it through all my wanderings and vicissitudes. I have been hard up times out of number, but I never could bring myself to part with it. It was a kind of link with the past—the only link, for the rest of the chain has disappeared."

She laid the ring on the bed, her face still averted.

"You speak as if—as if there were some mystery about—about your birth," she said, with calm, almost monotonous voice.

"There is," he said. "I'm afraid it is a very commonplace one," he added, as he slipped the ring on his finger and turned it over thoughtfully.

"Will you tell me your name? I do not know it yet—the boy asked me—I could not tell him."

"Gerald Wayne," he said.

She neither moved nor spoke, and yet Gerald felt as if his answer had in some way affected her; perhaps because of her silence.

"Well, I must be going," he said. "I am glad the lit fellow is all right, and—and I am glad to have met you."

sister. Perhaps"—his voice grew softer and full of a certain reverence—"perhaps we shall meet again."

"Yes," she said in a strangely unemotional voice. "Will you tell me where you are going?"

"I am going back into the country—to a place called Regna." She rose, then sunk down again, and her hands clasped each other spasmodically.

"I shall go to-morrow night, I think. But I am not going to remain there. I shall leave England presently. I've nothing to stay for—now. Good-bye, Sister Agnes."

She did not rise, but stretched out her thin hand, and he took it and held it. He could not see her face, but he fancied that her hand trembled, and he felt vaguely troubled and moved, and he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it reverently. Her lips parted with a deep sigh; she raised her eyes for a moment and looked at him; then, with a faint "Good-bye," bent her head, and so hid her face under the veil.

"The ring—his ring!" she murmured, hoarsely, as he left the room. "The name, *my* name! and Regna! Oh, God! deal mercifully with me! If the hope that has arisen within my heart is more than a baseless dream, give me strength to bear my great joy!" she prayed.

Gerald felt all the better for his interview with Sister Agnes, and in a calmer state of mind went round to Arundel House the next morning. He asked for Miss Harling, but, in his innermost heart, he hoped to see Claire, of course, and he was considerably staggered when the maid said:

"Miss Harling's out of town, sir."

"Out of town?" echoed Gerald, almost incredulously. Was it possible that she declined to see him? he asked himself bitterly.

"Yes, sir; she'd a letter from her father directly after you were here yesterday, and went off early this mornin'. Is there any message?"

Gerald shook his head, and went back to the hotel in a state of mind more easily imagined than described. Then he went up to London to catch the night mail for Downshire.

The letter that had arrived for Grace had surprised her, accustomed as she was to her father's erratic movements. In effect it said:

*"Come down by the eleven o'clock train from Waterloo to Yeoford, and bring Miss Sartoris with you. I have a special—
—a important reason for wishing her to accompany you. I
—I meet you at Yeoford."*

Claire was at Arundel House when this rather peremptory epistle arrived, and she had at first said that it was impossible she should go; but Grace had declared that she could not, and would not, go without her, and had herself gone round to Miss Gover, and begged for a holiday for Claire. It was not difficult to get, for Miss Gover knew that the change would do Claire good, and was able to fill her place with a pupil teacher. Sister Agnes, too, helped to persuade Claire.

"You will not be gone long, my child," she said, "and you will come back strengthened for your work."

So, at last, Claire yielded, and the two girls started. Grace was not in the best of spirits, and Claire was very quiet and thoughtful. She was running away from London—perhaps from her only chance of seeing Gerald again. She and Grace had said very little about him beyond those few words which Grace had uttered after Gerald had left the room, but she had told Claire of the way in which Gerald had saved her life, and Claire had listened with downcast eyes and rather tremulous lips.

She was thinking of him when the train reached Yeoford, and almost started when Grace said:

"Claire, I wonder why my father has sent for us—where we are going, and why he so specially wanted you?"

"From sheer kindness," said Claire.

Grace shook her head.

"Of course; I know that he would be glad to have you come with us. But don't you remember what he said in his note about a special and important reason?"

Claire smiled.

"His special and important reason lies in his desire to give me a pleasant change, Grace," she said. "What other reason could he have?"

"I don't know," said Grace, thoughtfully. "But I soon shall," she added.

Claire looked out of the window dreamily. How long ago it seemed since she had fled from the Court, homeless and well-nigh penniless! How often she had traveled on the same line, the heiress of Court Regna. And now she was just Miss Sartoris, a teacher, on probation, at a national school!

At Yeoford, Grace, who was looking out eagerly, exclaimed:

"Here is father!"

Mr. Harling opened the carriage door.

"There are two portmanteaus, father," she began, as she got her things together in preparation for alighting. But Mr. Harling smiled, and pushed her gently back into her seat.

"We don't get out here, Grace. How do you do, Miss Sartoris? It was very good of you to come. I have had the portmanteaus relabeled—"

"Not get out here? Why, where are we going, then?" demanded Grace, opening her blue eyes to their widest.

Mr. Harling smiled, and looked at Claire curiously.

"Are you very anxious to know, Miss Sartoris?"

"Of course she is!" broke in Grace. "Why, ever since we got your letter we have spent the time asking each other why you sent for us, and where we were going. Tell us, father!"

"We are going to Thraxton—if Miss Sartoris has no objection."

Claire colored painfully.

"To Thraxton?" she echoed.

Then she looked at him questioningly; but the old gentleman shook his head slightly, as if withholding the explanation.

"And why Thraxton, father?" said Grace.

"Why not that as well as any other place, my dear?" he retorted, quietly.

And Grace, shrugging her shoulders, subsided, remarking:

"Few girls have such a trying father as mine, Claire; especially when he has any mysterious business on hand. I suppose we shall have to wait until he wishes to explain."

"There is a nice old ruined castle at Thraxton," he said, mildly, but with a twitch at the corners of his mouth.

Claire said nothing. But she felt rather mean and secretive, and her embarrassment increased as they neared Thraxton.

Ought she to tell these good friends that she had been the owner of the well-known Court Regna that lay just beyond the place they were going to? Once or twice she almost made up her mind to lean forward and tell Mr. Harling; but her resolution could not be brought to the sticking point.

When they reached the station, Mr. Harling helped them out, and offered his arm to Claire.

"I have a carriage waiting," he said, quietly; and he led them to a pair-horse barouche, the best the best hotel could turn out.

"Where are you going, father?" demanded Grace, rather pettishly. "We seem to be driving right through the town."

"We are," said Mr. Harling. "Lean back, and let me cover you up with the rug. We are going to a place called Regna—"

Claire could not repress a startled exclamation.

"To Regna?" she said. "Mr. Harling, I— Oh! why did I come?" And her face flushed, and grew pale by turns.

"Because you were kind enough to trust one who desires—with all his heart—to be a friend, my dear," he said, impressively. "I knew that if I wrote that we were going to Regna, you—well, that you would not come."

"No!" said Claire. "I—I— Oh! if you knew!"

"Perhaps I do know," he said, soothingly. "Perhaps I know more about it than even you do, my dear."

"That—that I once lived at the Court?" said Claire, amazed.

"Yes," he said. "And why you left it."

They had been speaking in tones too low to reach Grace. But Claire's exclamation as she heard his words attracted Grace's attention, and he touched Claire's hand warningly.

"Will you trust me a little longer, Miss Sartoris?" he said. "I will promise that, though you may see cause for surprise and even doubt, that I will do nothing indiscreet or prejudicial to your interests. I have a reason for asking you to accompany me to the Court—"

"The Court? Oh, I can not go there! Indeed, I can not go there!"

"It is too late," said Mr. Harling, with kindly decision.

"We are passing in at the gates now. Be calm, my dear; you have, I hope, I may say, a friend with you who will protect, and, please God, right you."

Claire sunk back, very pale now, and trying hard to be calm and self-possessed. The whole business was at present a mystery to her. Her mind was confused by her unexpected presence at the Court—the Court of which she was no longer mistress—and Mr. Harling's evident acquaintance with her loss. And what memories—not only her lost wealth and station—but of Gerald—the familiar drive awakened!

She trembled so much as the carriage drew up and Mr. Harling helped her out, that he stopped for a moment and patted her hand encouragingly.

"What! Where are we, father?" exclaimed Grace, staring at the house, and then at them.

"At Court Regna—Miss Sartoris's house, my dear," he replied.

"No, no!" exclaimed Claire, breathlessly. "Let me explain. Oh, I can not go in!"

For Mr. Harling had led her into the hall, and the butler was coming forward with surprise and pleasure fighting for mastery in his face.

"Oh, I—we—didn't know you were coming home, miss!" he said. "I'm afraid the rooms— But I'll send for the housekeeper!"

"I am not going to stay," began Claire, almost too confused to speak, and not a little moved by the man's evident joy at her return. But Mr. Harling pressed her arm.

"I think you will stay," he said in a low tone.

Meanwhile, Grace had looked about her with mingled astonishment and admiration. In the course of the talk which had naturally followed on Grace's discovery that Gerald was Claire's lover, Grace had learned something of Claire's story; but she had not imagined that the house which Claire had lost was so large and imposing.

"And this was yours, dear?" she exclaimed, under her breath. "Oh! how could you *bear* to lose it? And why has father brought us here? I wish he would tell us. But that is the worst of him; he can be as secretive as a jackdaw when he likes! I am simply burning with curiosity and trembling with excitement."

She whispered this as the butler led them to the small drawing-room, and quickly lighted the candles. "I will have the fire lighted immediately, miss, and send a maid to you—"

"No, no!" said Claire, quickly and decisively. "I am not going to remain!"

As she spoke, they heard a step shuffle across the hall, and old Sapley entered.

"Who is this?" he demanded in his harsh voice, and peering across the dimly lighted room. "Who is it?"

Mr. Harling stepped forward.

"It is Miss Sartoris, Mr. Sapley. Miss Sartoris and her friend, my daughter."

Old Sapley stopped dead short and stared, and his sharp eyes turned from one to the other with a surprised gleam in them.

"Mr. Mordaunt!" he said to the butler. "Mr. Mordaunt; he is in the library." Then he turned to Claire. "Glad to see you, Miss Sartoris. You have come back to make some proposal, I suppose? Or just come to look at the old place, eh? Very pleased to see you. And your young lady friend. Take a chair."

But Claire still stood, looking straight before her, her face pale, her brows knit. Why, she was asking herself, had these *kind friends* subjected her to this humiliation?

The door opened, and Mordaunt entered. Even at that moment Claire was startled by the look of his face; it had the

expression which was like the shadow of despair, as if he had a presentiment that his luck was changing.

"Miss Sartoris!" he exclaimed, with a forced smile of welcome. "This is a pleasant surprise! When did you arrive? Why did you not let us know? Your rooms are being prepared for you and your friends." He glanced from one to the other with a simulation of pleasant welcome.

Claire raised her eyes.

"I came unexpectedly, unwillingly, Mr. Mordaunt," she said. "I shall not stay—"

"Oh! but, indeed—" he murmured.

But his father interrupted him with a harsh laugh.

"What's all this mean?" he exclaimed, sardonically. "There's some meaning in it—some trick or other! Whatever it is, out with it! Miss Sartoris might have been welcome enough a little while ago, when we offered to make terms. But things have altered. Court Regna is hers no longer—"

"Pardon me," said Mr. Harling, smoothly. "That is a strange mistake for you—a lawyer—to make, Mr. Sapley. Let me remind you that the notice of foreclosure has not expired yet, and that Miss Sartoris is in her own house, is sole mistress of Court Regna!"

"No, no!" murmured Claire, painfully. "Let us go. Please let us go! I surrendered it long ago to Mr. Sapley."

"I beg of you to be silent—to leave this to me, my dear!" said Mr. Harling, quickly, but gently. Then he turned to the old man.

"I am right, am I not?"

Old Sapley glared at him.

"Strictly speaking, yes," he said, with a snarl. "But Miss Sartoris gave up—"

"Have you any deed of surrender? No? Miss Sartoris is a woman, and was helpless and friendless. She is friendless no longer. I have—I admit, without her knowledge—taken upon myself the honor of acting as her friend and adviser. And I say she has a perfect right to occupy her own house."

"Certainly!" exclaimed Mordaunt. "And my father and I are delighted that she elects to do so. We have been living here because we thought it better that the place should not be left to care-takers—"

"Silence!" said old Sapley. "All this is flummery and nonsense! What is the use of her coming here and playing the mistress, when she knows that she will have to turn out in a few weeks?"

"Why?" demanded Mr. Harling, smoothly.

"Why?" croaked old Sapley. "Why? You know well enough, Mr.—Mr. Harling! She can't pay off the mortgage, and she is bound to go!"

"Pardon me!" said Mr. Harling. "Miss Sartoris is prepared to pay off the mortgage!"

"What!" old Sapley gasped, and his eyes started. Then he laughed scornfully. "Tell that to the marines!" he said. "Pay off!" he laughed derisively.

But Mordaunt had been watching Mr. Harling closely, and began to suspect the truth.

"It would be better to tell it to your solicitor, unless you are acting for yourself—which is unusual, isn't it, Mr. Sapley? However, I beg to give you notice that Miss Sartoris is ready to meet your claims at any moment you are prepared to establish them. There is the formal notice"—he placed a paper on the table near him—"and there is a letter from the London and Westminster Bank, stating that they will honor her check to the amount demanded, or a much larger one!" and he laid the letter beside the paper.

CHAPTER XL

OLD Sapley darted at them. But when he had got them in his claws, he looked at them as if he had lost the power of reading. His sallow face went livid, and his mouth opened and shut. Then he uttered a cry—a cry so full of the agony of disappointment and dismay that Claire could almost have found it possible to pity him.

As he staggered and clutched at the table, Mordaunt went up to him, and took the letters from his hand, read them carefully, and then, addressing Mr. Harling, said:

"I understand!"—his voice was scarcely audible, and his words came with a labored slowness—"I understand!"

He turned to Claire, who stood regarding Mr. Harling with blank astonishment.

"Miss Sartoris, you have won—you have beaten us!" He shrugged his shoulders, and a smile twisted his thin lips.

"Well, it is the fortune of war. We were the victors when last we met; we are now the vanquished. Mr. Harling is right—you are still mistress of Court Regna, and we"—his face reddened with humiliation and rage—"we are interlopers! We will leave the house at once. Come, father!"

He laid his hand on the old man's shoulder.

Old Sapley raised his head slowly, and looked up at him

with a dazed, uncomprehending stare. Then an expression of cunning self-satisfaction stole over his livid face, and he chuckled.

"Master of the Court—eh, Mordy?" he mumbled. "Mine at last—at last! This is a proud day for us, Mordy. Mordaunt Sapley, Esquire, M. P., member for West Downshire. Mordaunt Sapley, Esquire, of Court Regna!"

They listened to and looked at him with a slowly growing apprehension and horror. Did he fail to realize it, or had the shock of the disappointment driven him mad?

"What's she waiting for, Mordy?" he demanded, croakingly, and pointing a shaking finger at Claire. "Why don't you tell her to go! Let her go, Mordy! She's a nobody, and not fit for you! You'll marry a title now, Mordy—"

Mordaunt took the old man's arm, and almost raised him by force.

"Come away!" he said, harshly.

Claire moved forward a step or two.

"No, no!" she said, pitifully. "Let him stay—"

But Mordaunt swung round on her like a wolf driven to bay.

"What!" he said, showing his teeth, and glaring at her. "Accept your hospitality! We have not sunk so low as that, Miss Sartoris! I would rather die than remain beneath this roof—now that it is yours! Reserve your pity for those that need it! We are no longer your servants—your servants!" He laughed defiantly. "We treat with you as equals. We leave the place at once. Come, father!" And, putting his father's arm within his own, he almost dragged him from the room.

As they went into the hall a further humiliation awaited them. Servants know everything that happens to their masters and mistresses almost as soon as they themselves. Perhaps some one had been listening outside the door—old Sapley had spoken loud enough to be overheard—anyway, the hall was full of servants, and they stood and stared superciliously at the father and son as they came out of the drawing-room.

Mordaunt glared at them.

"My father's coat and hat!" he said, fiercely. "Order a carriage! D—n you! why do you stand and stare and gape?"

"Oh, we'll be quick, Mr. Mordaunt," said the butler, stung into retaliation. "It's the first order of yours we've executed willingly. Mr. Sapley's togs, James, and look harp!"

Mordaunt snatched them from the footman, and put them on the shaking, shrunken figure.

"Where are we going, Mordy? I don't want to go!" whimpered old Sapley.

"Hold your tongue!" snarled Mordaunt.

The servants melted away from the hall, and presently, in an incredibly short time, indeed, the carriage came up to the door, and Mordaunt almost carried his father to it. As the porter closed the door he heard a sharp cry—a wail of disappointment and despair from the old man.

The three left in the drawing-room looked at each other in silence for a moment or two; then Claire went up to Mr. Harling.

"Oh, I can't understand it—realize it all—yet!" she said, her voice trembling with emotion. "Is it true? Have you paid all this money for me? But I can not take it! You must know that I am very, very grateful! It seems wonderful, incredible, that any one could be so generous! But, oh, I could not take it! You must not ask me!"

Mr. Harling took both her hands and led her to a chair.

"My dear," he said, gently, as a father speaks to his daughter, "you shall tell me all this to-morrow, after you have rested and realized the change that has come over your fortunes. And let me assure you that you will pain me very much, very much indeed, if you allow your pride to rob me of the greatest satisfaction my money has hitherto afforded me. You are too kind-hearted to do that—isn't she, Grace?"

"Yes," exclaimed Grace; "and too sensible. My dear Claire, you don't know my father yet, or you'd know that when he has made up his mind to do a thing, not all the women in the world would prevent him. Besides—father, I must say it!—he is so disgustingly rich that I suppose this money is a mere nothing—"

"Hush, hush! my dear," pleaded the old man, as if he were ashamed. "It won't quite ruin us, my dear Miss Sartoris. And, to tell you the plain truth, and to make a clean breast of it, I've done what I've done to further my own ends; and you'd better wait to learn what they are before you utter a word of gratitude. Gratitude! It's I who ought to be grateful, as you'll discover presently. And now we won't say a word more about it—to-night, at any rate. Just forget that you ever left the Court, and try and persuade yourself that we are your guests for a day or two—as we will be, if you will have a. Oh, dear! It sounds very rude, but I am tremendously hungry!"

Almost as he spoke, the butler appeared.

"Dinner will be served in an hour, miss," he said, as gravely and in as matter-of-fact a tone as if Claire had never been absent. "Your rooms are ready, sir."

It was a strange meal, that dinner. They were almost too excited to eat; and yet the servants, by their manner, were evidently trying to carry out Mr. Harling's idea, and persuade Claire that she had never for an hour ceased to be the mistress of the Court. That there were rejoicings in the servants' hall at the sudden change of affairs was demonstrated by the buzz of excitement which now and again rose from that locality; and at intervals the staid butler permitted his unbounded satisfaction with Claire's return to display itself in his countenance.

The three sat and talked late into the night, but Mr. Harling would not permit his *coup de théâtre*, his beautiful little plot for the destruction of the Sapleys, to be discussed. He would talk of anything but that—and Gerald. It is scarcely necessary to say that *he* was carefully avoided.

At last Mr. Harling insisted upon their going to bed; but even when they went upstairs, the two girls found themselves in one room and still eager to talk.

"Oh, Claire, I don't know whether I am on my head or my heels!" said Grace, sinking at Claire's feet on the thick, fleecy rug before the fire, and leaning her arms upon Claire's knees. "And yet it seems so perfectly right and fitting that you should be queening it here. You *look* the mistress of this place, vast and grand as it is. And to-morrow you are going to show me how much vaster and grander it is than even I imagine it, aren't you? Well, it makes me happy to think of it. And you, Claire, dear; I should like to know *exactly* how you feel."

Claire laid her hand on the golden head.

"I am too bewildered to feel anything but gratitude—"

"You are not to speak of that!" broke in Grace, quickly.

"Are you happy, quite? No!" she looked up at Claire searchingly, "not quite! Ah! I know, dear!" and she sighed. "You are thinking of *him*!" The color rose to her face, and she looked aside. "Claire, what will you do?"

"What can I do?" murmured Claire. "Ah, what can I do?"

"You have been very wicked," said Grace. "You have wronged the noblest, truest, best of men." Her breath came fast, too fast for her words. Claire looked down at her.

"Grace!" she whispered.

Grace flushed to her white neck.

"Yes, dear!" she said, answering the question put in that one word. "Yes, it is true. I—I loved him. Wait! Listen! Do not misunderstand! I said '*loved*.' I loved him with all my heart; I would have given all the world if he could have loved me, but—but I knew he could not, even before I knew that his heart was given to you, and—and—I have fought with my love for him until I have torn it out of my heart. And yet there is love for him there still—a sister's love, Claire. There is nothing I would not do for Gerald Wayre. I could die for him as he was ready to die for me—I would go to the end of the earth, just to win an hour's happiness with him. Oh, how am I to make you understand?"

Claire bent down and kissed her.

"You are more worthy of him than I am, Grace!" she said, almost with a moan. "*You* have never wronged him, misjudged him. While I! Oh, I ache and burn with shame when I think of the way I have treated him. No wonder that he paid me back with scorn and contempt."

"Not that, dear," said Grace, quietly.

"Yes, yes, and a hundred times yes!" said Claire, scornfully; "and it was only what I deserved. I—I could almost wish that he had struck me the other day—I could have borne a blow better than the look in his eyes, the words which keep ringing in my ears and torturing me!"

"Would you do anything to win his forgiveness?"

"Anything!" echoed Claire, passionately. "Is there anything I would *not* do? Think of the extent of the wrong I did him! And—and he was poor and I was rich then! And he must have thought that I treated him—that I was proud of my money. Oh, Grace, Grace, when I think of it all, I feel as if I should go mad!"

"You are rich still; he is poor still," whispered Grace.

"Go to him, Claire."

Claire started, and the blood rose to her face with maidenly shame; then she grew pale again and a light glowed in her eyes.

"Yes! I could go to him. But I shall never see him again. I feel that. He *looked* it when he left me the other day."

"You must go to him *before it is too late*!" said Grace, earnestly.

"*Before it is too late*?"

"Yes. Oh, my dear, don't you see? He is still considered *guilty by some*—will be considered guilty until he can prove *is innocence*. And he will be able to do that when that

ship, the 'Polly,' the 'Susan,' or whatever is its ridiculous name, comes back. If you wait till then— Ah, well!"

Claire held her breath.

"Oh, Grace, how I love you for thinking of that! Oh, where is he?" And she began to pace the room.

Grace got a little frightened.

"In bed, where you and I ought to be!" she said; "and you shall go now. I shall stay. Oh, yes, I will, for I know what you will do; you will walk up and down like a tiger all night, Claire. I won't leave you to-night. Let me stay with you." And she put her arms lovingly around her. "Why, your heart is beating like a sledge-hammer, and you are shaking! Oh, dear! no wonder he loves you when you love him like this!"

* * * * *

Gerald got down to Thraxton the next morning and walked to the cottage at Regna. Although the news of Miss Sartoris's return had passed round Regna like a flash of lightning, there was no one about to tell him, and, as he was cooking his breakfast, he was thinking of her sadly. After breakfast he would run over to the inn and ask for tidings of Mr. Harling—for it is scarcely necessary to say that Gerald had no suspicion that Grace and Claire were in the neighborhood.

He had made his breakfast, and was toasting a piece of bread on the end of a fork, when he saw some one pass the window. It was a woman's figure, but he had not time to recognize it, and was turning the slice of bread, when there came a knock at the door.

He got up and opened it, with the toast in his hand, and almost dropped the latter in his amazement. For there stood Claire. Claire, herself!

"Can you tell me if Mr. Wayre—" she had begun, but there she stopped, crimson and white by turns, and stood with downcast eyes, speechless.

"Claire—Miss Sartoris!" he said—gasped, rather. "You—you want to see me?"

"Yes," she said, painfully catching her breath. "I—I—They told me that you had stayed here— I—I wanted to know—" Then her courage crept back to her. "Yes; I wanted to see you."

He held the door open wider, and drew back.

"Won't you come in?" he said. How commonplace, how *grotesque* the familiar phrase sounded!

She walked in, and he put a chair for her, but she did not

take it, and stood before him with downcast eyes, the loveliest picture he had ever gazed on. At last she raised her eyes and looked at him, and the look made his heart leap within his bosom and the fork to shake in his hand.

"Mr. Wayre," she said, and her voice was scarcely above a whisper, and, oh, so humble, so meek, "I—I have come to ask you to forgive me!"

Gerald stared at her, and repeated the words slowly.

"To—to forgive you?"

"Yes, ah, yes! I have wronged you—cruelly. No one has ever been so—so wickedly mistrusted and cruelly wronged. I—I know it now. I know how vile and baseless was my suspicion!" She could not go on for a moment, and Gerald said, stammered:

"You have heard—"

"I have heard nothing but what you told me!" she said, eagerly, passionately. "I knew when you spoke, at the first word you uttered, that—that—that you were innocent. And I let you go, thinking—thinking that I still suspected you!"

"You believe I am innocent?" he stammered. "Without proof? Thank God for that! Miss Sartoris, this makes me very happy!"

Claire's heart sunk at the "Miss Sartoris."

"And—and—you forgive me?" she faltered.

"Forgive you?" he said, earnestly. "There is nothing to forgive. Rather, I ought to ask your pardon for—for behaving like a brute the other day. Yes; and I *do* ask your pardon, Miss Sartoris, most humbly!"

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried—and yet in a whisper. "It is I who behaved like—like a brute!"

"No, no!" he said, eagerly. "You were right to suspect me. After all, it—it was only natural!"

"Natural?" she said, with a little pant. "It was unnatural, and—and wicked."

"Never mind," he said. "It is all over now. And you came to tell me this before the 'Susan' returned! Ah, that was like you, Miss Sartoris. Thank you, thank you! I can't tell you how grateful I am. I am—almost—a happy man now. Poor Lucy! I ought to tell you that I am trying to find out what became of her. But I won't bother you with that. What can I say to show you how grateful I am to you for condescending to come to me like this? Such goodness!"

He floundered on, his face flushed, his hand pushing his hair from his forehead—in the way she loved—and he did not see—oh, how blind is poor man where woman is concerned!

that he had only to take her in his arms, without a word—just take her in his arms.

“I—I will go now!” she said. “I—I hope that we shall be friends again—Mr. Wayne?”

So humble still! So full of pleading, the sweet voice! And yet he did not see!

“Friends. Ah, yes, if you will let me be one!” he said, gratefully. “I shall not be here long; but while I am here—I am glad you have come back to the Court. How funny it is that you should know the Harlings! Did they tell you how we met? I am painting Miss Grace’s picture; when I’ve finished that, and got to the bottom of poor Lucy Hawker’s case, I shall be off. You know my old love of adventure?”

“I know,” she said, almost inaudibly. “I hope—you—will be happy—I will go now.” She turned to the door. He followed her, and opened it.

“To come to me like this!” he murmured, almost to himself. “It is the sweetest, the noblest thing! Oh, I can’t realize it!”

“Yes,” said poor Claire in a whisper; “and—and—to come for nothing!”

He looked at her—her face went almost white, then flamed. Down went the fork which he had unconsciously held all the time, and out went his hand upon her arm.

“Miss Sartoris! Claire! Stop! You—you *shall not* go!” For, of course, she made to fly now; a woman always wants to fly at the first intimation of pursuit. “No! you *shall not*! Claire, look at me! Speak to me!”

CHAPTER XLI.

GERALD’S hand tightened on Claire’s arm—so much so that he almost hurt her; but she did not mind; indeed, it would have given her a subtle kind of joy to suffer pain at his hand, she had wronged him so!

“Claire,” he said, and his voice was hurried and broken, “why did you look at me like—like that? Is—oh, can it be possible that—Claire, forgive me. I must be mad! I must be deceiving myself as I did—before.”

She did not offer to withdraw her arm, but stood, her heart beating wildly, her eyes downcast. But suddenly she lifted them and looked at him again, and again her look—half pleading, half tender—and, ah! so wistful!—shot through him “like a warm dart,” as Owen Meredith says.

"Claire," he said, after he had caught his breath, "I love you! I can't help it! I must tell you! I have tried to forget you, to harden my heart against you, but it is of no use. I love you, and I shall always love you till I die. I told you all this before, and—and you gave me your answer; but I tell it you again, for the last time."

She turned her face to him pityingly, wistfully.

"Not—the last time—Gerald!" she whispered in a voice that thrilled through him. "You must tell it to me again and again; because—because I shall never be tired of hearing it!"

It was almost too much for him, the suddenness of his joy, the infinite witchery of the tender smile that stole over her lovely face.

"Claire! Oh, my love, my love!" he breathed, and he caught her in his arms and pressed her to him, so that indeed she could scarcely whisper his name.

"Tell me once more, once more, dearest!" he said. "I—I can scarcely believe it. Just say, 'Gerald, I love you!'"

"Gerald, I love you!"

"And I will be your wife!"

She hid her face on his breast. "And I will be your wife!"

"Claire!"—after a pause, after he had kissed her lips, her hair—"this isn't—isn't—what do you call it—reparation? Ah, no, I know you wouldn't deceive me. You love me, dearest, really and truly? Good heavens, it seems so wonderful; why should you?"

"Because—you are Gerald! That is all!" she murmured. "Gerald—let me hide my face for shame; don't—don't look at me just yet. There, turn your face away, dearest." She put her hands to his face caressingly, and averted it. "I—I—Oh, how can I say it— I came to tell you! I came to ask you—to ask you to take me! I could not have gone away; I could not! I should have fallen at your feet and prayed you to have pity on me!"

"Claire!" he gasped.

"Yes! Think, dearest! I had wronged you so cruelly, and I loved you all the time! And my pride and jealousy had nearly wrecked my life, and there was no pride left in me, and no—no—ah, no self-respect. Gerald, shall I kneel to you now? Shall I? Shall I say what I meant to say, if you had *not—not* guessed and asked me? I should have clung to you *and* cried, 'Gerald, I love you—I have wronged you. I have *been* a poor, miserable little fool, with my pride and my *sus-*
picion. But I loved you all the time. Have pity on *me*!"

Take me for your wife. You shall do what you like with me, bully me—beat me—anything! Only let me live with you and try and show you what a woman's love means!"

She was sobbing now, half hysterically; and, he half frightened, and trembling almost as much as she, soothed her with a lover's whispered word, the lover's touch.

"Hush, hush, dearest! These are not words for you—for *you*, my queen—it is I who should kneel." He sunk on his knees and drew her hand to his face. She stooped and raised him.

"No, no! Here, on my heart, Gerald!" she panted.

* * * * *

"And you haven't had your breakfast!" she exclaimed, a moment or two later.

"Breakfast? No, not yet. Have you?"

She shook her head, and tried to smooth the hair his caresses had ruffled.

"No; I came out—the house seemed stifling, and I was restless—to—to inquire after you."

"Have some with me!" he said, joyously.

"Shall I?" she said, wistfully, shyly.

"Why not?" he responded. "See, I'll make some more tea—it's got cold."

"And I'll do the toast; let me, Gerald!"

"There's some eggs somewhere," he exclaimed, rushing about, laughing without knowing it. "Where's the butter? Am I awake or dreaming? Stand still a moment and let me look at you."

She drew herself up and let his eyes wander over her. "Yes, it is you!" he said, with a long breath. "Now, don't come near me, or—or we shall never get any breakfast. There's the bread—and—oh, here are the eggs, I remember. Oh, yes, after all I must be dreaming, don't you know? I shall wake up presently and find that you have gone, and that I am still hungering and aching for you!"

"I'd better give you something more substantial to eat, and quickly," she said, with a laugh. And the laugh was like sweet, wholesome music in the little room.

They got breakfast—after several interruptions and interludes—and both discovered that they were hungry. It was scarcely proper, perhaps, for these two, alone, to be seated opposite each other—like man and wife. But they had no thought, and very little care, for the proprieties at that moment. He had got his love, his life's angel at last, and all the rest didn't matter. And she—well, if all the world cries

shame, she would not have cared. He was hers—hers—her very own, and nothing should come between them again.

They talked after awhile, and Claire told him of the Sapples' nice little plot, and Mr. Harling's goodness. Gerald was amazed, but understood in a moment.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "The villains! Well, I might have suspected it. And that dear old fellow! But—but, Claire"—his brows knitted perplexedly—"can you—can you accept?"

Claire leaned her head on her hand. "All night I have been asking myself that question," she said. "It was hard to answer. At one moment I felt that I could not, at another that perhaps I ought, that I could, perhaps, take it as a loan. But now I haven't to decide, thank Heaven!"

"You haven't? Why not?" he asked.

She blushed and lowered her eyes, then raised them and looked at him with a woman's complete surrender.

"Because there is some one else who decides everything—*everything*—for me now, and I leave it to him. It is delightful!"

Interruption and interlude.

* * * * *

"Well, I don't know what to say. For one thing, of course, I should be glad if you hadn't a penny in the world, because then I should have to work for you. Think of it, dearest! But that's selfish, I know."

"You couldn't be selfish, if you tried," she remarked, with solemn decision.

"Oh, couldn't I?" he retorted. "You wait and see! Well, we'll talk it over with him. They are the nicest, most warm-hearted people in all the world. I am fond of him as if he were my father, and of Grace as if she were—"

He caught a sudden expression in her face.

"What's the matter now?" he asked.

"Say, 'sister,' Gerald!" she said.

"I was going to say sister," he said, innocently.

She nodded. "I don't mind your loving her as a sister," she said, very quietly.

"Why, of course not!" he exclaimed. "You like her, too, don't you?"

"Yes—like a sister also," she said. "Gerald, you—you *must* come up to the Court and tell them."

"After breakfast," he nodded. "Some more tea, please!"

Then suddenly, in the midst of their wonderful happiness,

Claire remembered where they were. She put her cup down and looked at him pitifully.

"Oh, Gerald! That poor girl—Lucy!"

His face grew grave. Yes," he said. "I've got to carry that business through. You must help me, dearest."

"It seems so heartless to be so—so happy in this house!" she said in a low voice.

He got up and comforted her, of course.

"We are doing her no wrong, dearest," he said. "Our joy can not injure or insult her. But, come, we will go at once. Let me put your hat on for you. Which is the right side, or doesn't it matter? There! Oh, Claire, how lovely you are! Would to God I were more worthy of you!"

"Don't say that, Gerald," she almost implored. "Never say that again. It—it makes me think of the way I have treated you, and—and that hurts me!" and she clung to him with a little shudder.

They went out and walked demurely enough up the street, for the Regna folk were about and eager to welcome her; but when they got into the lonely lanes, their hands stole together and clasped, and they went along like two children sweet-hearting.

Mr. Harling and Grace were on the steps looking for them, and Grace turned rather pale for a moment as she saw them coming along together; but it was only for a moment, and it was her last time of showing any emotion at sight of Gerald.

"Oh, here you are!" exclaimed Mr. Harling. "Grace declared that you had bolted back to London and the school; but I knew you were too sensible to do that. How are you, lad?" and he wrung Gerald's hand. "You two have found each other, then, eh?" he asked, looking at them shrewdly.

"Yes," said Gerald, drawing Claire's arm within his. "I have found her never to lose her again, I hope."

"That's all right, then," cried the old gentleman, chuckling and rubbing his hands. "Come into breakfast."

"We've—we've had our breakfast!" faltered poor Claire, going rosy-red.

Mr. Harling laughed with keen enjoyment.

"Of course you have! Nice behavior of one's hostess, I must say! To run away, and leave her guests to breakfast by themselves!"

"No, you are the host here," said Claire in a low voice.

"Don't you make such a ridiculous mistake, my dear young lady!" he retorted. "Court Regna is yours, and no one else's. I hope Gerald has persuaded you to look at th

matter in a sensible way. I'm not so sure that you are so much indebted to me as you think. My lawyer has got to examine the Sapleys' claims, and I shouldn't be at all surprised when he does so, if he finds that roguery has been at work, and that a good slice will have to be deducted. That will leave you something of an income; and the estate, properly managed, will clear itself in time. That is, of course, if you insist upon repaying me. But I'm not so sure that you will—presently." He nodded and smiled rather mysteriously. "But don't let us worry about money on such a day as this! Let us be happy—"

"We certainly sha'n't, if we talk about money," interrupted Grace, who, with her arm round Claire's waist, was going round the hall, looking at the portraits and curios.

"No. I propose—if I may venture to do so—that Miss Sartoris takes us all for a drive and shows us, something at least, of her 'kingdom by the sea.'"

"The dog-cart; and you shall drive. Claire is a splendid whip, sir," said Gerald.

Claire blushed and laughed.

"Very well," she said. "We will take a holiday to-day; but to-morrow I—I must go back to London. I mustn't run away from them without a word, must I? Miss Gover—oh! you don't know how kind she has been to me! And Sister Agnes—I must go and tell her—everything!"

"Sister Agnes?" echoed Gerald, with astonishment. "Do you know her?"

"I live with her—did live with her," said Claire in a low voice. "She has been—ah! I can not tell you what she has been to me. No mother could have been more loving—more—" Her eyes filled with tears.

Gerald stared at her.

"Why—Sister Agnes! A white-haired lady, with sad-looking eyes? But, of course, it must be the same! Why, I know her! I met her—oh! I must tell you all about it!"

He did so, leaning over the back of the dog-cart, as Claire drove them through the familiar lanes, and across the downs, from whence they could look down on the sea stretching away to Labrador.

"I don't wonder at your loving her!" he said in a low voice. "I can't tell you the impression she made on me. I can't explain it to myself. It was as if—oh! I can't explain! Claire, dearest, do you think she would—"

"I know what you are going to say," she murmured. "I

think I know your thoughts before you utter them, dear. You think she might come down here!"

"Yes. How would it be if I ran up to town, and persuaded her to come back with me?"

"You might," said Claire, "if you told her I wanted her very much."

"I'll try it," he said. "I'll go up to-morrow. And I'll go and see that Miss Gover. Fancy your teaching in a school, Claire! Doesn't it sound like a dream?"

"And you must make her promise to come down in the holidays. Oh, Gerald!" And she swung round with an eager flush on her face, "if we could get her down here—to the school, you know! The mistress has talked of retiring for ever so long. Miss Gover would be so happy in the country, and—ah! it would be so delightful to have her near us!"

They made a long drive of it, and Mr. Harling was duly impressed by the extent and wealth of the estate.

"Yes," he said to Claire, rubbing his chin, "you ought to be able to repay me—if you want to."

After lunch Mr. Harling and Grace disappeared, and Gerald and Claire went out alone. As if they were drawn there by a common impulse, they went to the chapel, and stood beside the tomb, looking down at it, hand in hand, with love hovering over them.

"Do you remember?" he whispered—as if she had forgotten! "I fell in love with you that first morning, Claire! Do you remember the sketch?"

"Yes," she said; "where is it? Oh! I hope you have kept it, Gerald!"

"Yes; here it is!" he said. And he drew the pencil portrait from his pocket and gave it her.

Her face crimsoned, and she uttered a little cry of surprise and delight.

"Oh! how wicked of you! And—and how sweet of you! But it isn't like me—it's too flattering. Gerald, I must have it!"

"I think not!" he said, decisively. "Ask me for the half of my kingdom, and it is yours; but not this! Stay! I'll make a bargain with you. I'll give it you when—when you give me the original. It shall be my wedding present, Claire. I sha'n't be able to buy you gold or gems; but this is the most precious thing I've got, and I'll give it you to show you how much I love you."

Interlude and pause.

It was the only allusion he made to his poverty, his int

ority in the matter of wealth and position, but Claine noticed it.

"Gerald," she said, creeping very close to him, and taking the edge of his coat timidly, "if—if you'd rather, I—I should give up the Court and go back to the school, or—or—"

"Let me work for you!" he said, eagerly. Then he shook his head. "Dearest, it is like you to propose it, but I've no right to demand such a sacrifice. Besides, I am not ashamed of your wealth or my poverty. If I were rich and you were poor, you would not let that come between us?"

"No, no, no!" she said. "I would marry you if you were King Cophetua, and I were the Beggar Maid! How clever you are to put it that way, Gerald!"

They sat long over dinner, and Gerald, of course, found it hard to tear himself away. Saying "good-night," in the semi-darkness of one of the recesses in the hall, was a prolonged business; but at last he whispered the last words, coaxed for his last kiss, and went homeward suffused with love and happiness.

It was a beautiful night, with the moon at the full, and Gerald, naturally enough, considering his condition, was loath to go in. He thought he would climb up to the cliff before doing so, and turning off from the road, just outside the village, took the narrow footpath.

As he stopped for a moment to light his pipe, he saw a man coming along the downs at right angles with the path. The moon was partially obscured, and for a moment or two Gerald did not recognize him; but presently, when the light was clearer, he saw that it was Mordaunt Sapley.

He wore a thick pea-jacket, and its collar was turned up so that it nearly hid the wearer's face; and yet it was by no means a cold night. He was walking quickly, and yet cautiously, and he glanced round now and again watchfully.

Gerald thought the dress and manner curious, and, being now naturally suspicious of Mordaunt, drew back under the shadow of the cliff, and waited until Mordaunt had gone on ahead. Then cautiously and noiselessly he followed him.

CHAPTER XLII.

MORDAUNT had taken his father to their old house, which, perhaps, with a vague presentiment of some such reverse as *which* had befallen him, he had left in the hands of a *taker*. Before they had reached the house, Mordaunt *ed the grewsome fact that* his father's mind had given

way under the shock. He was almost mad himself; for he knew that his career—in Downshire, at any rate—was over; his ambitious projects blighted and destroyed. Even if Claire, and Mr. Harling, and Gerald were silent, the servants would not hold their tongues. In a few hours the story of the Sapples' discomfiture would be spread far and wide. He would not dare to show his face in public; if he ventured to address a meeting he would be hooted from the platform.

His career was ended, and he recognized the fact at once. The shock was hard to bear, but another sentiment besides disappointment lessened and deadened it. He had been beaten in the matter of Court Regna—his luck was changing; how about his dread secret buried beneath the sand below the cliff?

He paced his room—the room adjoining his father's, where the old man lay chuckling and muttering under the delusion that he had still got the Court within his clutches—paced it like a tiger newly caught and trapped, and faced the situation. There was only one thing to be done. To buy that accursed bundle and Jenks' silence; to get together the money he and his father possessed, and leave England. He would be very rich—the Court mortgage sum alone was very large—in another country he could begin to climb the social ladder again.

But the first thing was to get Jenks out of the way. He had put off the meeting, night after night, for reasons which can easily be understood. He dreaded, loathed, having to look at, touch the bundle, to have to speak of the dead girl. But he could put it off no longer. It was too late that night, but he would go to-morrow.

He threw himself on his bed as the dawn crept into the window, but he could not sleep. Court Regna gone, his life's ambition wrecked; and all in a few hours! As he tossed from side to side, he cursed Claire, Gerald, even his father, with the impotent, unreasoning fury of a thwarted villain. The next day he looked into his affairs, and took steps to realize all the property he and his father possessed, and—bitterest task of all—sent in his resignation of the candidature to the local committee. He gave for an excuse for his withdrawal the fact of his father's sudden and dangerous illness.

He was occupied the whole day, and eat nothing; keeping himself going by occasional drinks of stiff brandy and water; and at night, with burning head and whirling brain, he stole out of the house, and stealthily made his way to the cliff. *As he stole along the familiar path he paused now and again, and caught his breath and shuddered.* He could almost tan

that the wraith of the murdered girl was gliding along by his side; and once, as a sea-gull flew over his head, shrieking, he had hard work to suppress a scream, for it seemed to him as if it were Lucy's voice as it had risen in its piteous cry at the moment he thrust her over.

A light was burning in Jenks' hut, and he crept up to the window and peered in. The man was sitting by the fire smoking, and a devilish longing jumped into Mordaunt's heart. How if he stole in behind the man and— But he put it away from him with a shudder, and tapped at the window.

Jenks rose and opened the door, and did not show the least surprise at the visit.

"Oh, here you are, Mr. Mordaunt," he said, stolidly. "I thought as how you'd turn up one o' these nights. Come in and sit down, Mr. Mordaunt. Sorry I haven't anything to offer you."

Mordaunt stood and looked at him, and then round the hut furtively.

"I have no time to waste. Have you done as I told you?"

"Yes; and had to stand no end o' drinks on the strength of that old rich uncle o' mine. I could leave here to-morrow—to-night for that matter—and they wouldn't think it queer."

"Good!" said Mordaunt. "I have brought the money. Give me," he moistened his lips and looked round with a shiver, "give me the—the bundle."

"Right you are, sir," said Jenks, cheerfully. "Where's the money, sir? Notes or shiners?"

"Notes, notes!" replied Mordaunt, impatiently. "Did you think I could get so large a sum in gold, man?"

"Notes," said Jenks, doubtfully. "Hem, don't fancy them, somehow. Easy to trace, ain't they?"

"For Heaven's sake, don't wear out my patience!" Mordaunt interrupted. "Give me the cursed thing, and let me go. I will meet you at Liverpool to-morrow and see you off—not that I am afraid."

"Oh, no; only just in the way of kindness, o' course!" said Jenks, placidly. "I'll get the bundle."

He dragged a sea-chest from the wall, and, with an old wood chopper, lifted the flooring boards, and slung—flung—the bundle on the table.

Mordaunt started back with a low cry and an oath, and stood looking at the things as if they were alive and were crying, "Murderer! Murderer!"

Jenks stared at him. "You look bad, Mr. Mordaunt," he said. "Blest if you don't look wuss than you did when you

chucked her over the cliff, or when you were piling the sand atop of her down there on the sand slip!"

Mordaunt shuddered.

"Curse you! hold your tongue!" he said, hoarsely, and looking round fearfully. "Do you want any one to hear you shout—"

"Oh, I ain't afraid," said Jenks. "But I begs your pardin; I ain't given to whispering, you see. Howsumever, there's the bundle, and I'm off to-morrow the first train. Now for them notes, Mr. Mordaunt. Lord, to think of my happenin' to be in that part o' the beat that night, and chancing to see you chuck Lucy over—she cried out awful, didn't she?—should make a rich man o' me! Wonderful, the ways o' Providence, ain't they, Mr. Mordaunt?"

Mordaunt took some notes from his pocket-book and some gold from his purse.

"You understand!" he said, thickly. "You will keep your promise? But you *dare* not come back! Remember what I told you! You are an accessory after the fact, and run the same risk as I do!"

"Right you are, Mr. Mordaunt. I've been thinking that over, and I've been tempted more than once—especially since Mr. Wayre came back—to turn—what do you call it?—Queen's evidence, and I'm not sure that it wouldn't be my best plan."

Mordaunt waved his hand impatiently; then stretched it out toward the bundle.

"What are you going to do with it?" he asked Jenks, as serenely as if he were referring to a piece of old sail-cloth.

Mordaunt wiped the sweat from his white and haggard face.

"Throw it in the Black Pool," he said. There was a pool near the jetty, formed by a circle of rocks, which held the tide for a depth of ten or twelve feet.

Jenks shook his head.

"Better burn it," he said. "Burn it here; I'll make up the fire."

Mordaunt paused, irresolute. He would have to stand by and see the bundle untied, to watch while it was gradually consumed; it was beyond his power of endurance.

"No!" he said. "I—I can not! It will sink, with stones, to the bottom of the pool."

He took up the bundle; it shook in his hand.

"Open the door!" he said, hoarsely. Jenks lurched round the table, but before he could reach the door it opened, and Gerald stood on the threshold.

Mordaunt dropped the bundle, and uttered a shriek. Jenks started back, looked from one to the other, and with stolid *sang-froid*, said:

"Too late. I'm blest if it ain't Mr. Wayre! No, Mr. Mordaunt, I shouldn't take your money." He wagged his head toward the notes and gold. "I told you just now that I should turn Queen's evidence, that it wasn't no use asking me to destroy that there bundle."

Mordaunt, mad with rage at the man's duplicity and change of front, caught up the ax and dashed at him.

Gerald flung himself between them and caught Mordaunt's arm just in time to avert the blow from Jenks, and gripped Mordaunt tightly. Despair, near akin to madness, will endow a man with the strength of a fiend. Though he was not nearly so strong as Gerald, Mordaunt wrestled with him with desperate persistence, and once Gerald was underneath. A pair of pistols hung over the fire-place, and Jenks snatched one down and fired it outside the door, then he came in and stood philosophically looking on at the fight.

At last Gerald mastered the frenzied man, and, pinning him to the ground with his knee, looked over his shoulder at Jenks.

"Give me a rope, anything, to tie his hands!"

"No, no!" gasped Mordaunt. "I—I surrender!"

"Get up!" said Gerald, sternly.

Mordaunt shuffled to his feet, and leaned against the mantel-piece, panting and shaking, and eying the two men like a trapped wolf.

"That—that man is a liar!" he gasped. "A liar and—and a vulgar, common scoundrel. He enticed me here with—with a cock-and-bull story about Lucy Hawker."

"Silence!" said Gerald. "I was outside. I heard every word; I followed you here. My God, and it was *you* who killed Lucy! Silence! Remember that every word you say must be repeated. You killed Lucy."

Mordaunt glared at him sideways. "Keep your threats for those who fear them," he said, thickly. "I am in your power; what do you intend to do?"

"Hand you over to the police," said Gerald, grimly. He turned to Jenks. "Jenks, go down and bring up a constable. I will wait here."

"Ay, ay, sir!" said Jenks, cheerfully, and he went out.

"He will escape," said Mordaunt, between his teeth; but almost as he spoke, Jenks came back, accompanied by a couple of coastguards who had heard the pistol-shot.

"I charge this man, Mordaunt Sapley, with the murder of Lucy Hawker," said Gerald, sternly. "You will take him to the police station at Thraxton. We will go down to the village and get a vehicle."

The coastguards stationed themselves on either side of Mordaunt. He leaned against the mantel-shelf and pointed to his cap, and one of the men picked it up for him and threw it to him. He put it on, and turned to the glass, and in doing so stealthily whipped the remaining pistol from its place and thrust it in his breast. The action was so rapidly, so smoothly done that no one noticed it, for they were all talking together in an excited undertone.

"Go on," said Gerald; and with Mordaunt between them, the two coastguards led the way.

"Glad you came up, Mr. Wayre," began Jenks; but Gerald stopped him.

"You had better hold your tongue until you appear before the magistrates," he said, significantly.

"Right you are, sir!" assented Jenks, and then followed the prisoner in silence.

As they drew near the village, lights began to flash about the houses, and they heard the murmur of voices; and at the head of the street they were met by a crowd of fishermen and women.

"What's up?" demanded one, raising his lantern, and the others gathered round. "Why, it's Mr. Mordaunt! What-ever's happened to 'un?"

"It's a bad business, mates!" said one of the coastguards.

"Yes," said Jenks. "We've found the man as run off with Lucy Hawker. It was Mr. Mordaunt here."

A cry of astonishment ran round the crowd.

"Mr. Mordaunt! What's he done with her? Mr. Mordaunt! Why, it ain't possible!" They pressed forward; their eager faces shining in the light of the lanterns.

"You'll know presently, so I may as well tell you," said Jenks. "He pitched her over the cliff the night she was thought to have run away. Pitched her over the west cliff and buried her afterward in the sand slip just below."

A cry of horror rose from the group, followed by a groan and a yell of rage.

Mordaunt shrunk nearer the coastguards and clutched one of their arms.

"It's—it's a lie!" he gasped.

"He says it's a lie," said a man. "Answer, Jenks! The truth—the truth!"

"It's true enough," said Jenks, stolidly. "I see him. He came up to-night and offered me money—"

"A lie!" shrieked Mordaunt.

The men talked together excitedly, and swayed to and fro for a moment in wild confusion; then one cried out:

"Mates, it's easily proved. Let's go and see. Bring him along, you chaps!"

"No, no!" said Gerald. "He is my prisoner! I order him to be taken to Thraxton!"

But he felt that he was powerless to oppose them.

"Don't you interfere with we, Mr. Wayre!" growled one of the men. "We'll prove the truth of it. Bring him along, or we'll tear him from 'ee!"

Resistance was useless, and Gerald signed his consent. Mordaunt clung to the nearest coastguard. "No, no!" he shrieked. "I will not go! I—I demand protection! Take me to the police—"

A sullen roar arose, and a fisherman sprung forward.

"Bring him along, or we will!" he said, with an oath.

Surrounded by the excited mob, which increased at every step, Mordaunt was led down the street and round the rocks to the strip of sand. By the time it was reached, he was almost incapable of standing, and one of the guards grabbed him by the arm, and so supported him.

Jenks measured the slip with his eye.

"There's the spot!" he said.

A man had gone into a cottage and snatched up a spade, and he began to dig. But the crowd could not wait, and some of them went down on their knees and tore at the sand with their knives. Presently one of them uttered a low cry; he had discovered a portion of a woman's dress. The spectators echoed the cry with a moan—a moan of terrible suspense and excitement—and the man with the spade worked more carefully.

As each shovelful of sand was thrown up, Mordaunt shuddered, and clung more tightly to the coastguard, and presently, as a deep sob rose from the crowd, followed by a yell, and then an awful silence, he sunk on to the ground.

"It's her! It's Lucy! Oh, my God!" shouted a woman, throwing her arms above her head.

Screams and oaths rent the air; and Gerald, fearing that Mordaunt would be lynched, torn from limb to limb, flung *himself* in front of him.

"Stand back!" he said. "He is in the hands of the law! Justice will be done! Stand back!"

As he spoke, half a dozen men threw themselves upon him and pinioned him, and one man—it was the young fisherman, William—sprung upon Mordaunt, and dragged him to the open grave.

“Look at your work, you devil!” he cried, hoarsely. “Look at it!”

And he forced Mordaunt’s face down. The wretched man screamed with terror, and wound himself round the legs of his captor.

“Spare me! Spare me! Don’t kill me!” he shouted. “I’ll confess! I’ll— Don’t kill me!” And he writhed upon the sand like a wounded snake.

The man spurned him with his foot.

“Get up, you—you murdering dog!” he said, hoarsely. “We won’t kill ’ee! We’ll leave that to the hangman. Stand back, mates! Let no one touch him! Leave him to Mr. Wayre; he’ll see that justice is done by ’un! Oh, Lucy! Oh, my God!” And he covered his face with his hands.

Gerald sprung forward and stood right across Mordaunt.

“You hear?” he said, for the crowd, with white, wolfish faces, still threatened. “William’s right! Leave him to the law! It will avenge poor Lucy!”

The crowd groaned sullenly.

“Let’s bury him with her!” said one in a hoarse whisper; but Mordaunt heard, and a scream of agony rose from his white lips. They saw him turn over writhingly, and thrust his hand in his breast; then a sharp report rang out, and a tongue of flame shot forth, and, with another shriek, he rolled over on his face.

There was an intense silence for an instant—a silence that seemed more hideous than the din which had preceded it. Gerald sprung aside; then bent over the prostrate figure. The crowd gathered round, and one of the coastguards knelt and placed his hand on Mordaunt’s heart.

“He’s dead!” he said, solemnly. “He’s shot himself!”

The line of white faces and staring eyes, above which the moonlight fell placidly, started back, and a cry of disappointment rose.

“Curse him—he’s done us, after all!” said a voice. “He’s give us the slip!”

Gerald held up his hand.

“No!” he said, solemnly. “He stands before the Great Judge, my men, and He will do justice!”

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE scene at the double inquest was a terrible one. Women wept and shrieked, and men groaned and clinched their hands tightly as Jenks told his story. It all seemed so clear now, and they were amazed that their suspicions had never been directed toward Mordaunt. Many of them remembered having seen him and Lucy together, but his duplicity had been so fiendishly perfect that he had deceived them all.

The jury wanted to bring in a verdict of murder against Mordaunt, and consign him to a suicide's grave, and it was with difficulty that the coroner could persuade the twelve stern, white-faced men to return the usual verdict. The only unmoved person in the court was Jenks. He gave his evidence in his usual stolid fashion, every now and then fingering and looking down at his empty pipe, and he was not even surprised when the coroner had him arrested as an accessory after the fact. It may be added, in parenthesis, that he was equally unmoved when, later on, the judge sentenced him to seven years' penal servitude for his passive share in Mordaunt's dastardly crime.

When the painful scene was over, and Gerald made his way from the stuffy room in which the inquest had been held, surrounded by a crowd eager now to congratulate and make a hero of him, he became suddenly faint and queer. Gerald was an exceedingly strong man, as we know; but he had gone through a great deal lately, and the scene of the inquest, following upon the still more terrible one on the sands, had, in common parlance, got upon his nerves.

He got away from the crowd at last, and went home feeling sick, and, to his surprise, was actually sick. Mr. Harling and Claire, coming in search of him, found him white and shaking, and in a state of collapse; and though Gerald tried to make light of his condition, Mr. Harling insisted upon his going to bed and sending for the doctor.

"It's all nonsense," said Gerald. "I'm just a little upset, and shall be all right presently. I want to go back to the Court with you and Claire; I don't want to go to bed."

But, of course, he had to go; and the doctor, when he came, *blantly but firmly* insisted upon his remaining there.

Claire, of course, wanted to stay and nurse him; but Gerald *could not hear* of this, and a woman volunteered to act in

that capacity—strange to say, the woman who had been most violent against him when he had first come back to Regna and had been surrounded by an accusing mob. But Claire spent a great deal of the day beside him, holding his hand in that silence which, to persons in their happy condition, speaks so much and so sweetly.

Perhaps Gerald's sudden illness was a blessing in disguise, for it kept all our friends from dwelling upon the terrible events of the last few days. The whole place was in excitement, not only on account of the murder, but over the return of Miss Sartoris, and the destruction of the cunning plot by which the Sapleys had sought to obtain Court Regna and the estates.

Old Sapley was mercifully unconscious of his son's crime and its dramatic punishment, and would remain ignorant to the end of his life. The doctors pronounced him incurably insane, and he had been removed to a private asylum, where, surrounded by comfort, he spent the time in going over imaginary accounts, and informing the doctors and nurses, and any one who would listen to him, that he was the master of Court Regna, and that Mr. Mordaunt Sapley, who was the member for the county, was *his* son.

Claire and Mr. Harling went, at Grace's request, to see him. The visit was a painful one to them, but not to him, for he had no recollection of them; and told them the story of his triumph with imbecile chuckles and gloating enjoyment.

"My son's a clever man," he said. "There's no knowing what he'll rise to. He's in the House, you know, and they'll be sure to give him office. He'll be in the Cabinet some day, and he'll marry a noblewoman. Shouldn't be surprised if they made him a peer. He'll be Lord Sapley—no, that ain't good enough—why shouldn't he take the old title, the title that went with the place that's his now? Yes, he shall be Earl Wharton—Lord Wharton, of Court Regna."

Claire went away weeping, for the sight of the old man in his insane triumph wiped out any feeling of resentment she might have harbored against the man who had caused her and Gerald so much unhappiness.

One afternoon Gerald, waking from an uneasy sleep, saw a dark-robed figure sitting beside the bed. It reminded him of Sister Agnes; but he thought he must be dreaming, and he stretched out his hand and laid it on her arm.

It was Sister Agnes, and she turned her pale, sad face on him with a gentle smile.

"You are awake?" she said in her soft, placid voice.

"I suppose so," he assented, rather doubtfully. "But is it really you, sister?"

"Yes, it is I."

"That's funny," he said. "I've thought of you a great deal, and I dreamed of you last night. Why did you come?"

"Because you had need of me," she said.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Claire wrote and told me you were ill. Something bid me—I felt that I must come."

"It's very good of you," he said, "and I am very glad! Are you going to stay?" he asked, wistfully.

"Yes," she replied. "I have sent the woman away. I am going to nurse you."

"You won't have to nurse me very long," he said. "I'm quite well, only a little shaky about the pins, and I'm longing to get up."

"You shall get up when you're well enough," she said.

"Ah!" he said, "I see by the tone that I've got a real nurse now. There's no one so tyrannical and overbearing. But don't you think I'm a poor and unprotected male! There's Claire, she'll take my part. I suppose she has told you that I'm her sweetheart, and that we're going to be married?"

"Yes, she has told me," said Sister Agnes, gently forcing him to lie down again, for in his eagerness he had got up on his elbow, "and I am very glad. You will have the sweetest wife, the best and truest woman—"

"Now, that's unfair!" said Gerald. "You're speaking my part. Sister, there isn't another woman like her in the wide world, and if you'll kindly help me to get out of this foolish bed and marry her out of hand, I shall owe you a life-long debt of gratitude."

As he spoke, Claire entered and exclaimed with joy and astonishment at the sight of the black-robed figure standing beside him.

"Sister Agnes!" she cried; and the sister's arms were round her in a loving embrace, and they were so engrossed in the joy of their meeting, that they almost seemed to forget Gerald, until he reminded them of his unworthy existence by remarking confidentially to the ceiling:

"I don't appear to be on in this scene."

Then Claire turned to him, and with a blushing "May I?" to the sister, knelt and kissed him.

"I wanted you to come," she said to Sister Agnes, "but I *do not* like to say so in my letter. Gerald was coming up

to fetch you. I have so much to tell you, and I want to hear all about the school."

Sister Agnes smiled.

"I am loaded with messages," she said. "Tiny and all your class send their love. Miss Gover does not send hers." She smiled again, with the first touch of archness in her face that Claire had seen. "She says that if you do not return within four days she will report you to the Board, who will doubtless proceed against you for breach of contract. She says that if it's true you have recovered your wealth, it's one of the most unfortunate things she has ever heard of; because you would have made a first-rate teacher, and in time must have risen to the position of head mistress, which, Miss Gover says, is one of the proudest on earth."

"As she will find," said Claire, "when she becomes head mistress of the Court Regna schools, with the schools rebuilt and the prettiest of school-houses—planned by Gerald Wayne, Esq., architect—made ready for her."

"Isn't she an angel?" demanded Gerald of Sister Agnes.

"Miss Gover?" said Claire. "Have you only just found that out? Ah, I forgot! You do not know her. But you will indeed say so when you make her acquaintance—an angel with the sharpest little eyes, and the sternest little voice, and the tenderest big heart that ever beat in a woman's bosom."

"In-deed!" remarked Gerald. "I was thinking of another angel."

"Meaning me?" said Claire, with delicious frankness. "I'm not a bit of an angel. You both know that. I'm only a commonplace young person, dominated by one idea—yes, a one-idea person, and Miss Gover says there is nothing more contemptible."

"I think I rather like contemptible people, then," said Gerald. "And may one ask what that idea is?"

Claire grew rosy red, and shook her head.

"Not before Sister Agnes," she said.

And Sister Agnes, who might have been expected to chide their levity, sat and regarded them with a tender smile upon her placid lips and a deep light of protecting love in her gray eyes.

"You must make him quite well very soon, sister," said Claire, "and bring him to the Court. Mr. Harling and Grace—whom you know—are with me—and I can do nothing until he comes, and there is so much to be done!"

"To the Court!" said Sister Agnes in a low voice, the

smile fading from her face. She bent her head under the concealing veil, then she looked up steadily, and said: "Very well; I will bring him. Go now, my child," and she glanced at Gerald's flushed face.

Gerald recovered his strength very quickly under Sister Agnes's care. After the first day—one might almost say the first few minutes—he accepted her devotion, for it was no less, as a matter of course. This way of taking it surprised him himself; but without any volition on his part, he had grown to regard her as if she belonged to him—as if he had some special property in her. He could scarcely bear to have her out of his sight, and when he was strong enough to get up, he leaned upon her, not as a man leans upon a nurse, but as a husband leans upon a wife, a son upon his mother. Once or twice, in fact, he addressed her as "mother," as he had done on his first meeting with her; and, as then, she trembled at the word, and her eyes grew moist.

Sitting together by the fire, he gradually told her in full the story of his life. It was a wonderful story, and she listened with a sympathy of which he was conscious, though she seldom said a word, contenting herself with now and then laying her thin and wasted hand on his strong one.

But of herself and her own life's story she said nothing, and Gerald revered her too much to ask a word, though he often regarded her with a silent and almost painful curiosity.

One day, after he had been chafing at his enforced inaction and imprisonment, she said, quietly, but with a little shake in her voice:

"You are well enough to go to the Court to-day."

"Bravo!" he shouted.

"But you must be quiet," she said, tenderly. "It is all arranged. A carriage will be at the top of the steps in a quarter of an hour. You can walk thus far?"

"I could walk fifty miles if Claire were at the end of them!" he said, joyously; and he would not let her help him to put on his overcoat. "I am going to escape from your clutches from to-day," he said.

It was only an affectation of triumph, and he did not mean it, for his heart was full of gratitude; but she winced a little, looking up at him piteously, and he was aghast at the effect of his bantering speech.

"Why, I didn't mean it," he said; "you know I didn't! If you could look into my heart, you would see how grateful, w—"

He put both hands reverently upon her shoulders.

"I know," she said. "It was foolish of me. Perhaps I can look into your heart. Lean on me as you go up the steps, though you may not need to."

As they climbed up the quaint and unique village street, the people came out and thronged round them to greet Gerald with affectionate congratulations, and the sister with respect and gratitude. No one looking at the people, as they stood round, bareheaded and smiling, would have recognized in them the furious, blood-thirsty mob which, a few nights before, had threatened to tear Mordaunt Sapley limb from limb. But this is the way with Regna folk. They are as gentle as lambs, and as responsive to affection as women; but rouse their wrath and indignation, and the lamb becomes a tiger, and the woman a fury.

Claire and Grace were waiting in the carriage, and it is difficult to say which of the girls, in their respective ways, made more fuss over Gerald and his nurse.

As they drove to the Court, along the cliff road down which Claire had ridden on her way to the chapel that morning long ago, and through the lanes now bare of leaves, but still beautiful with the promise of another spring, and up the wide avenue with its lines of towering elms, Sister Agnes was very silent. She leaned back with her arms folded across her bosom, her face concealed behind the veil, so that the others could not see that her lips were moving in that silent prayer which reaches Heaven more quickly than any flood of eloquence.

Her face was pale, and it quivered with some emotion when Mr. Harling met them on the steps and was made known to her. Grace fell in love with her at once; and indeed it seemed as if this sad-faced woman, in her black robe of mercy and self-renunciation, were the central figure, for that day at least.

She stood in the hall, with Claire on one side of her and Gerald on the other, and looked round with a sad and thoughtful gaze, as if the sight of the place aroused a sentiment more profound than curiosity and admiration.

They went into lunch, and the young people were very bright and almost merry; for Gerald was throbbing with the excitement of newly regained health, and the delight of being near his beloved; and Grace, upon whom the famous air of Downshire had wrought a marked improvement, was in possession of all her natural *esprit*.

The shadow of the Sapleys and their evil doings was already

passing away from the ancient house, upon which the sun of happiness and youthful love was again rising.

They talked and laughed, but were not forgetful of their two elders, who sat and spoke together in graver tones; and Gerald would now and again turn, with a word and a smile of tender regard, to the white, patient woman beside him.

"We want to show you all over the Court after lunch, sister," said Claire. "Gerald, who knows it all by this time, shall act as cicerone and point out its lions." As she spoke, she bent and kissed her. It was delightful to have her at Court Regna and to know that she was resting from her life of toil amongst the poor, of whom none had suffered more keenly than she herself.

After lunch Gerald led them into the hall, and assuming the air of a guide, rapidly indicated the various objects of interest, and epitomized their history.

"But the pictures," he said, "are, perhaps, Miss Sartoris's"—with a mock bow to Claire—"most valuable and priceless possessions. If you will step this way, we will proceed to view the family portraits of the Wharton family."

He changed his slightly burlesque tone to a more serious one as he ran over the portraits, and, naturally enough, drew the sister's arm within his.

"This," he said, gravely, "is the portrait of the last Lord Wharton."

As he spoke he felt the arm tremble and the frail body sway. Mr. Harling, who had been standing near, with his observant eye upon her, stepped forward quickly and took her other hand. Before any one could speak, she had recovered herself and stood looking at the portrait with a mask-like face and unfathomable eyes. She looked at that moment like one of the pictures stepped from its frame.

"You are tired," said Gerald. "We will rest."

"No," she said in a low voice, but quite firmly. "Let us go on, please!"

Gerald drew her arm through his still more closely, and they went along the corridor and to the end of the body of the building.

"There is an old wing here," said Gerald, "which Claire would like to show you. It is the wing I was at work upon; but we will see it some other day."

"I would like to see it now," she said.

Mr. Harling signed to him to withhold any further remonstrance, and Claire, unlocking the dividing door, they passed to the room which had just escaped demolition.

"Is it not a fine old room?" said Gerald. "It was here that I was at work. Oh, by the way, do you know, Claire, I had quite forgotten the portrait?"

"What portrait?" asked Claire.

"The portrait of the lady we found behind the panel," he said. "Don't you remember? I stuck it back there the day I left, and it must be there still, of course. I should like to show it to the sister and Mr. Harling. May I?"

"Why, certainly!" whispered Claire. "Why do you ask me? It is all yours;" then aloud: "I'll send for a chisel or something."

"No need," he said. "I can get at it with this;" and he took out the old knife with which he had hunted, carved, and cut fagots and other things too numerous and too varied to mention, and getting on a chair, removed the panel with ease and took out the picture.

"It's none the worse," he said. "Wait till I've dusted it, and you will see how beautiful it is."

They all gazed at it, then Mr. Harling uttered an exclamation and glanced at Sister Agnes. She had sunk on one of the ancient chairs, and was looking at the picture with the same set face and unfathomable eyes. They all followed his gaze, and Claire, after a moment or two of silence, said in an awed voice:

"Sister, it is like *you*!"

Sister Agnes smiled a strange smile.

"The portrait is that of a young girl, Claire. I am an old woman."

"Still there is a likeness," said Gerald in a hushed voice.

"I see it now. Why did I not notice it when I first saw you? Do you detect it, sir?"

Mr. Harling rubbed his chin and looked hard at the floor.

"Likenesses are very deceptive, my lad," he said. "Put the picture down; the sister would like to rest here for a little while. Miss Sartoris, if I might take the liberty—"

—"In your own house?" said Claire, with a smile.

For once he did not contradict her, but went on quietly.

"I would suggest that we have our tea here."

"I will go and see to it," said Claire. "Come with me, Grace!" and linking her arm in Grace's, she ran out of the room, more like a school-girl than so important a person as the mistress of Court Regna.

Mr. Harling closed the door after them, and going up to Sister Agnes, laid his hand gently and protectingly on her.

"My dear," he said, "shall I tell him the story of that

picture? You know that I have guessed—discovered it? But you yourself do not know all. It has only come to my knowledge very recently. Are you strong enough to hear it?"

"Yes," she said in the same tone.

Mr. Harling looked at Gerald.

"My boy," he said, "be prepared for a surprise, and try to take it as calmly as she, God helping her, will do."

Gerald said nothing, but bent his head and stood erect with folded arms.

"It was not a whim, Gerald, that took me to that place—Lartree," said Mr. Harling. "I went there to find a sister from whom I had parted when I was a child. She was older than I, and had been a mother to me, and when I came back to England my first thought was of her. I did not find her. I shall not do so till I have crossed the last river. She had married the vicar of the place, and she had died of a broken heart. His heart had broken also, for they had lost their only child, the treasure of their lives. She had not died, but had left them with her lover, and had passed out of their lives as completely as if snatched from them by the hand of death itself. I wanted to find where this daughter—my niece, remember—had gone. And I have."

His hand closed on the sister's. The black-robed figure was bowed and motionless.

"If you are thinking ill of her, cease to do so. The man she fled with married her. He took her away with him to Italy, and there, deeming her guilty of betraying him, he left her. A child was born. She thought that it had died"—his hand closed more firmly on the one he held—"but she was deceived. The boy lived. It was taken from her and placed under the care of a couple in England. He grew up with them to boyhood, and then he ran away from them to sea."

Gerald moved slightly and looked from one to the other, but said nothing.

"Mother and son were completely ignorant of each other's existence. She came to England at last and devoted herself to a life of charity. The saints are not all dead yet; she is one of them." His voice broke slightly. "*He* wandered about the world until it chanced that he came to a place called Regna."

Gerald uttered an exclamation under his breath.

"Be silent and be calm, my lad," said Mr. Harling, with a warning glance at the figure beside him. "I chanced to *meet him* at the very place at which his mother was born. *Do you wonder that I started when you told me your name,*

Gerald? For it was the maiden name of your mother—Wayre.”

Gerald could not repress a cry now.

“*You,*” said Mr. Harling, “were her son and my kinsman. The man she married was Lord Wharton. This lady, whom God protect, is Lady Wharton, and your mother!”

There was a profound silence in the room; then—how, he knew not—Gerald was on his knees before her, with his arms straining around her, and his head upon her bosom, while sobs of “Mother!” “My son!” broke the solemn silence.

* * * * *

Lady Wharton’s severe training in the sternest and most severe of schools had endowed her with a marvelous power of self-restraint; and though her whole being was thrilling with that most sacred of all emotions, maternal love, she exerted that power on behalf of the still more shaken and agitated Gerald. She soothed him with word and caress, and in a very few minutes they were sitting, hand in hand, with tears on their cheeks, ’tis true, but outwardly calm.

“Mother!” whispered Gerald, as if the word were the sweetest his lips could frame, and “Gerald, my son!” she murmured in response, while Mr. Harling stood at a little distance, with his back turned to them, and his face hidden in his handkerchief.

“And you are Lady Wharton,” said Gerald. “Think of it, mother—mother!”

“And you are Lord Wharton,” said Mr. Harling, coming up to them. “Think of that!”

Gerald started. He had, in fact, not thought of it yet.

“Now, you see,” remarked Mr. Harling, dryly, “that you and Claire need make no fuss about my paying the Sapleys’ mortgage. I’m your uncle, my boy, or something like it. Shake hands! God bless you, my boy! You little thought, when you fought for Grace’s life, that you were risking yours to save your cousin. I’m your kinsman, as I say; and I suppose I’m at liberty to spend some of my money in saving the estates, if I like. It’s the first time in my life I’ve got any real enjoyment out of the pile, excepting when I’ve been buying something for Grace, and it makes me feel quite glad that I found the Butterfly.”

Gerald wrung his hand.

“But they’re Claire’s estates, you know,” he said, with a laugh. “They were not entailed, and Lord Wharton—”

“Your father!” murmured Lady Wharton.

"Yes, my father," said Gerald in a low voice, and still wonderingly, "left everything to her; and it was the very best thing he could have done." Then he looked at them gravely. "By the way, sir, I"—he stopped and bit his lip, and looked a little troubled—"couldn't we keep our secret a little longer? I've got my mother, and I don't care a fig for the title. Couldn't we keep it until Claire and I are married? She's—well, it will be no news to you if I tell you that she's proud. You know that. She wouldn't be my own dear Claire if she were not. If she knows who I am she will want to hand over the estates, and— Mother, I don't want her to do that. I would rather marry her as we are; she, the mistress of Court Regna, and I, just Gerald Wayre—quite a nobody, without a title and without a penny."

Of course the mother understood instantly.

"Yes, keep the secret," she said, looking up at Mr. Harling.

He hesitated.

"Well, I don't know," he said. "You two will find it precious difficult to hide it. You won't be able to look at each other without having 'mother' and 'son' in your eyes."

"We have called each other 'mother' and 'son,'" said Lady Wharton, tremulously.

"Well—well!" said Mr. Harling, resignedly. "Let the boy have his way. But, mark me, Gerald, only till after the wedding. You must take your proper place then. I'm going to take that as my reward for hunting out the truth. I want to see my sister's grandchild in his proper place—the Earl of Wharton! I want to see my niece recognized and righted!"

Lady Wharton trembled.

"I am Sister Agnes," she said.

"You are that boy's mother, my dear," he said, warmly, "and you owe it to him, to your dead parents' memory, to your family, to take your right place and position."

"It shall be as Gerald wishes," she said.

"Hush! Here they come," he said. "After the wedding. We must be married at once. You must help me to persuade her, mother. Hush!"

He had just time to kiss her and move away from her before Claire and Grace came in. They were laughing about something, and were flushed with running up the stairs. Claire went up to Lady Wharton and put her arm round her.

"Are you rested, dear?" she said. "Tea's just coming. How happy you look!"

"I am very happy," said Sister Agnes, and her eyes filled

with tears. Gerald went to the window. The footman brought in the tea, and Claire at once began to pour it out.

"It was a happy idea of yours, Mr. Harling," she said, "and we'll often have tea here—when it's rebuilt, I mean," she went on, glancing at Gerald. "The architect has returned after a long holiday, and is going to resume operations. On the south side he intends building two suites of rooms; one of them for some friends of mine—Mr. Harling and his daughter—and the other for a lady who will be kept a close prisoner here. I say a prisoner, because it will only be by chaining her to some article of furniture that we shall be able to keep her from escaping to her dearly beloved slums. However, perhaps we shall be able to find her some poor and dirty people in Regna. Let us hope so."

She looked at Sister Agnes bewitchingly, as if she defied her to refuse, and then went on, turning to Gerald:

"Oughtn't we to keep this antique furniture, Gerald, just as it is? We want Mary Lexton here, and she is coming in a week or two. I heard from her this morning. She knows all about furniture, and can 'spot' the genuine antique. Is that right, Gerald? I'm trying to learn all his slang, Mr. Harling, because I find it so much more expressive than ordinary English."

"Some of it's very expressive," said Mr. Harling, with a twinkle in his eye.

Claire blushed.

"Well, I have to make a selection, of course; it's so difficult to tell whether a word's wicked or not. I tried one on Lord Chester yesterday, and he didn't even wince, and it would be so easy to shock him."

Gerald looked down at her with a fine smile.

"Easy for most people, I dare say," he said. "But some of us are privileged."

The color rose again to Claire's face. She had told Gerald of Lord Chester's offer, and, strange to say, it had not roused his jealousy, but only increased the warmth of his liking for that true nobleman.

"Yes," said Claire, musingly, "we will let Mary loose on the furniture, as Gerald would say, and she shall arrange it just as she pleases. It will be delightful to see her trying to drag that old bureau about, for instance," and she nodded at it.

Gerald started.

"By Jove!" he said, "that reminds me!" and he began fumbling in his pocket. It was full of papers and sketches

and they all watched him with the faint amusement and enjoyment with which we all watch a man hunting for something. "Oh, here it is!" he said, at last, and he held up an envelope. "Do you remember my finding some papers that had been left in that old bureau, Claire?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, but you must!"

"If you say so, I do," she said, with so meek a smile on her lovely face that Grace laughed.

"I gave them to you, and you gave them back to me to take care of, or give to Mr. Sapley, I forget which."

"And you have taken care of them in a man's usual way," said Mr. Harling. "If you want to forget anything—if you want to lose a letter, for instance, give it to a man to post. I've carried one about in my pocket, already stamped, for months."

"I've carried these about for months," said Gerald. "I put them into this envelope, meaning to post them, then I thought I'd bring it myself. That's what brought me back to Court Regna," he added, with a simplicity that made Lady Wharton smile and the rest laugh. "It is fearfully dirty; the envelope, I mean; but there it is at last."

Claire took it.

"It looks as if it had been carried about by the Wandering Jew," she said, lightly. "I suppose they'll turn out to be nothing more interesting than old bills or receipts." She looked at her name written by his hand with the look which only a woman in love can wear, then she daintily opened the envelope.

Gerald had beckoned Lady Wharton to the window, and was talking to her in a low voice, when Claire rose with a faint exclamation. They turned and saw her standing with two faded papers in her hand. Her face was white, and there was a startled expression in her eyes. She looked round the group, then holding out the papers a little, she said in a low voice:

"You have not read these? But of course not. Can you guess what they are? No, you can not. This is Lord Wharton's will!"

"Lord Wharton's will?" Mr. Harling said, quickly.

"Yes," said Claire, looking at him with a strange light in her eyes. Women are quick to grasp a great truth, quicker than men, when the fact closely touches those they love. *his is his will, his last will. I know the date of that*

which he made in my favor. This is"—she glanced at the paper—"two years later."

They held their breath.

"And—?" asked Mr. Harling, comprehensively.

"No, it does not leave Court Regna to me," said Claire. "I knew it. He told me almost with his last breath that he had not done so. This will—see, it is all in a few lines—leaves everything, excepting a provision for me, to his son."

Gerald and Mr. Harling exchanged glances. Lady Wharton stood with her arms folded across her bosom, patient and calm.

"To his son," continued Claire in a hushed voice, "*Gerald Wayre!* Gerald, is it you?"

He went and put his arms round her. She put both her hands, with the papers in them, on his breast, and looked at him, her breath coming fast. Something like dread mingled with the amazement in her eyes.

"I am Lord Wharton's son, dear!" he said.

She laughed; it was a little hysterical.

"You are Lord Wharton, the Earl of Wharton?" she breathed.

"I am Lord Wharton, Claire," he said. "But it is not proven yet."

"Yes," she said, and the hand that held the smaller paper fluttered on his breast. "This is the certificate of your birth. He must have put it with the will, that there might be no doubt, no difficulty. Take them, Gerald. Everything is yours." She laughed still a little hysterically, and her hand seemed to close on him clingly. "Oh, I am so glad, so glad! You are Lord Wharton! Think of it, Gerald! I am so glad and so—proud. And I have been robbing you all this time. But I give it all back to you now, dear—everything."

She seemed to divine by the silence that her surprise was not shared wholly by the others, and she looked over her shoulder at them.

"Why, you knew it, sister!"

Gerald drew Lady Wharton forward.

"You have given me Court Regna, dearest," he said, and the tears that shone in his eyes were no shame to his manhood. "Shall I give you something in exchange? Claire, this is my mother—and yours."

As Lady Wharton took the now sobbing girl in her arms, Gerald turned aside, tore the will in two, and dropped it on the fire which the servants had lighted. But Mr. Harling

sprung forward and snatched the half-burned document from the grate.

"Excuse me, young man," he said, dryly; "you forget that I've an interest in the property;" and he carefully extinguished the paper, folded it as carefully, and, with a nod, placed it in his pocket.

* * * * *

The wedding was to have been a quiet one—quite quiet—but perhaps no one was very much surprised to find, when the bridal party made its way to the church, that the time-beaten little edifice was crammed; that not only the church-yard, but a large space in front of it, was filled with an eager, excited and delighted crowd. Carriages lined the roads, gay with bunting and laurel, for some distance; for though the invitations had been few, the guests were many. The county simply declined to be left out of an affair which so intimately concerned it, and everybody who could be present came to look on at the most romantic wedding which had ever taken place in Regna; or, in fact, in the county itself. Claire had always been popular, and Gerald had won a place for himself in the hearts of the poor; and the fact that the sweet face of Sister Agnes was Lady Wharton, and his mother, added a zest to the situation which heightened the interest and excitement.

As the bride appeared, a murmur of admiration and affection, which soon grew into a loud cheer, greeted her and sent the blood to her face.

Mr. Harling, who gave her away, was perhaps the proudest man in what was afterward described as a popular demonstration; and he shook hands with Lord Chester three separate times, as the two men, warm friends already, made their way with difficulty through the crowd. But indeed his pride seemed to be shared by the whole throng, who felt as if the mistress of Court Regna belonged to every one of them, as indeed, in the best of all senses, she did, and continued to belong.

As for Gerald, his pride in the lovely creature who was that day made his own was overwhelmed by a joy so great as to fill him with a wondering amazement.

It seemed to him, even as they drove back to the Court, side by side and hand in hand, as if even now he doubted the reality of his overwhelming happiness; and his hand closed on hers in a grip so tight that she could feel the impress of her wedding-ring—her wedding-ring!—on the fingers next it.

"*Claire! Claire!* Is it all a dream?" he said.

She was silent a moment, then she whispered:

"Yes, it is all a dream, Gerald; but you and I will go on dreaming it."

They were still in dream-land as they passed up the steps lined by a cheering crowd, for the Court was open to all who chose to enter its grounds that day—a crowd that shouted with all the power of its lungs: "God bless you, my lord! God bless you, Mr. Gerald! God bless you, my lady! Heaven keep you and send you happiness, Miss Claire! Long life to our lord and lady!" They were still in dream-land when they stood in the hall, surrounded by their true and tried friends, and they did not wake to the full sense of the happiness God had showered upon them until Claire was lying upon Sister Agnes's tender bosom, and they heard her murmur, with a little sob:

"God bless you, my son and daughter!"

Of that wedding-breakfast Downshire in general, and Regna in particular, still talks. Lord and Lady Wharton are famous for their hospitality, but none of the splendid entertainments which have since been given by them within the stately walls of Court Regna have effaced the memory of the never-to-be-forgotten marriage-feast; and men still quote, with admiration and despair, the speeches made by Mr. Harling and Lord Chester, and talk of the bride and her beauty.

There is always a little pause after the excitement of such a tremendous function, and perhaps few noticed that the bride and bridegroom, attired for traveling, had stolen away, or that the Dowager Lady Wharton was also missing. These three had left the crowd of rejoicing guests and had gone down, side by side, to the little cottage in the shrubbery. It was not Lady Wharton's first visit there.

As they stood by the bed, the old woman who had accompanied her in her girlish flight looked up at her with dim but smiling and loving eyes; but it was to Claire she spoke. To her, Gerald and Claire were Lord Wharton and the girl with whom she had sailed in the yacht; and as Claire bent down and kissed her, she said, with placid satisfaction:

"You're looking as well and bonny, my lady, as ever; and my lord, too, is just as he always was. Ah, well; you deserve a good and handsome husband, my lady; and my lord is that, let people say what they will."

"Say 'God bless you,' nurse," whispered Claire.

"God bless you, my dear," said the old woman, as if she were a little surprised at the request and Claire's emotion;

"and God bless my lord, too. Does the yacht sail to-day? Is the weather fine?"

"Yes, nurse," said Gerald's deep voice; "and, please God, we shall have a long and prosperous voyage."

Just before the happy pair entered the ribbon-bedecked carriage which was to convey them to the station, Gerald handed a long-shaped parcel to Mr. Harling. It looked as if it contained an ax; and, in fact, it did, and a very fine and useful ax it would have been if Terence could ever have brought himself to use it, instead of hanging it over his fire-place, and pointing it out to every one who entered the hut, and insisting upon telling them the wonderful story of its donor.

It may be mentioned that Gerald and Claire themselves found it there when they paid Terence a visit later on.

With shouts of "Come back soon—come back soon!" ringing in their ears, they were whirled to the station; and at last, in the reserved carriage of the London express, realized that they were alone.

It is a strange feeling, that isolation in the midst of a great joy and absorbing happiness. These two could only look into each other's eyes in silence for a time; then Gerald said, as he drew the costly furs more closely round the woman whose small hands had opened the gates of the earthly paradise for him:

"Claire, that cry of theirs echoes in my ear. We must go back soon. We shall be happy over there in the warmth and sunshine; but Court Regna lies very near my heart—almost as near as its queen." She nestled a little closer. "I first learned what love meant when I met its mistress there, and somehow it seems mean and cruel to rob it of her, even in this moment of our joy, and even though it be only for a time."

"You have not robbed it, Gerald," she whispered, her lips close to his. "Think. You have given it a master as well. You are Court Regna's lord and master, and mine. Be good to us both, dear my lord, for we love you passing well!"

THE END.

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